

Academic Stress among University Students: The Necessity of On-Campus Student Support Structures.

The case of Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk.

Elena Ivakhnova



European Masters in Higher Education (HEEM)

Faculty of Education, Institute of Educational Research

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the responsiveness of Russian higher education to the need of maintaining students' mental health on campus. The main focus of the study is the support structures established at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk and the way they help students, pursuing higher education, alleviate excessive academic stress. In addition, one of the aims of the current study is to explore the possibility of introducing at the Russian university student support structures similar to those at the University of Oslo, Norway.

Several qualitative interviews were carried out for this study comprising three different groups of stakeholders at the Russian university: the students of the faculty of foreign languages, the faculty administration and the university administration. The findings of the fieldwork were subsequently analyzed based on the two different theoretical perspectives: the psychological approach which emphasises the importance of the individual psychological framework of the student for analyzing their subjective experience at the university, and the approach which places the concept of power into the centre of institutional practices influencing students' higher education experience.

Using these two theoretical perspectives helps to highlight the importance of looking at the problem of academic stress among Russian students from different angles. On the one hand, no one can deny the importance and relevance of the successful functioning of psychological counseling on higher education campus; on the other hand, efforts should be made to change the whole teaching and learning culture at Pomor State University in order to facilitate students' psychological wellness and create a collaborative learning and teaching atmosphere both for students and academics.

In addition, the thesis concludes that it would be hard to introduce at Pomor State University student supports structures that exist at the University of Oslo due to several reasons: financial constraints, lack of managerial positions, as well as, time constraints due to the particular amount of hours allocated to the academic practices at the Russian university. Moreover, the Russian mentality as such, together with common prejudices against seeking professional psychological help, can create barriers for helping college students in Russia overcome excessive levels of academic stress.

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Table of contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
LIST OF TABLES	6
1 INTRODUCTION	7
1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY	7
1.1.1 <i>The Russian higher education system</i>	8
1.1.2 <i>Psychological wellness of Russian higher education students</i>	10
1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	12
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	14
1.4 POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	15
1.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	16
1.6 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY	17
2 LITERATURE OVERVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	19
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	19
2.2 RESEARCH ON INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDENT	21
2.2.1 <i>Introduction.....</i>	21
2.2.2 <i>The definition of stress</i>	21
2.2.3 <i>Stress in university students</i>	23
2.2.4 <i>Sources of stress (stressors).....</i>	27
2.2.5 <i>College counseling services</i>	31
2.3 THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN POWER, INSTITUTION AND INDIVIDUAL.....	33
2.3.1 <i>The concept of power at the university.....</i>	33
2.3.2 <i>The changing economic and social functions of higher education.....</i>	35
2.3.3 <i>The context and power at the university.....</i>	37
2.3.4 <i>The institutionalization of time, space and activity.....</i>	40
2.3.5 <i>The changing nature of the process of learning and assessment</i>	41
2.4 CONCLUSION	43
3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	45
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	45
3.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DESIGN	45
3.3 STUDY SETTINGS AND TIMING OF THE RESEARCH.....	47
3.4 RESEARCH RESPONDENTS.....	49
3.4.1 <i>Selection of the students</i>	51
3.4.2 <i>Selection of the members of the university administration, faculty administration and policy implementors</i>	52

3.5	DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES AND METHODS	52
3.5.1	<i>Instrumentation</i>	52
3.5.2	<i>Pilot testing</i>	53
3.5.3	<i>In-depth interviewing</i>	54
3.5.4	<i>Focused group discussion</i>	56
3.5.5	<i>Document analysis</i>	58
3.6	DATA MANAGEMENT AND DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES	59
3.7	RESEARCHER'S PRECONCEPTIONS	59
3.8	VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY	60
3.9	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	61
3.10	SUMMARY.....	62
4	PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS	64
4.1	INTRODUCTION	64
4.2	THE CASE OF POMOR STATE UNIVERSITY IN ARKHANGELSK.....	65
4.2.1	<i>Perceived levels of academic stress in students</i>	65
4.2.2	<i>The problem of students' adaptation to the university</i>	71
4.2.3	<i>The need for psychological help for students at the university</i>	73
4.2.4	<i>Students' psychological service on campus</i>	77
4.3	STUDENT SUPPORT STRUCTURES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OSLO	80
4.3.1	<i>Student counseling</i>	80
4.3.2	<i>Student Health services' psychiatric/psychological section</i>	81
4.3.3	<i>The Buddy system</i>	82
4.3.4	<i>The ability of Pomor State University to establish a Norwegian system of student support structures on campus</i>	84
4.4	SUMMARY	87
5	DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	89
5.1	INTRODUCTION	89
5.2	DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FINDINGS.....	90
5.3	RECOMMENDATIONS	99
5.4	IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	103
5.5	CONCLUDING REMARKS	105
6	LIST OF REFERENCES.....	107
7	APPENDICES	115
	APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	115
	APPENDIX B – STUDENT STRESS CALENDAR.....	118

List of tables

Table 2.1 Contextual layers at the university.....	38
Table 3.1 Respondents of the study.....	50

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Years spent at the university are said to be the best ones in a person's life. Multiple domains of higher educational institutions attract young talents by broad opportunities to achieve full academic potential, to practice their capacity to critical thinking and questioning, as well as, experience longed personal freedom and find their own identity. Thus, many school graduates are often enthusiastic about joining the university atmosphere of commitment, academic challenges, rich and engaged learning experience.

But what if the long-awaited entering into the academic community doesn't meet students' expectations, and instead of becoming a member of "the knowledge elite", a freshman feels alienation and estrangement from the rest on campus and from higher education experience in general? What if higher education is perceived as limiting one's potential, wasting the opportunities and alienating the individual?

In fact, researchers argue that studying has an emotional impact on peoples' lives (Mann, 2008: 98). Academic development of a college student is said to be an integral part of personal development; both of them take place in specific social settings - a higher education institution - which influence both learners' experience of learning and individual cognitive development (Reason et al., 2007). In addition, studies show that the last few decades have put additional pressures on contemporary university students (Kadison, 2004). High academic expectations on the behalf of the university have resulted in a highly increased number of students experiencing stressful situations at the university resulting in some cases in severe emotional disorders and mental health issues.

Thus, the severity of this problem on university campus can not be underestimated. Stress is said to have influence on students' learning, academic performance, motivation, interpersonal relationships between teachers and students (Kadison, 2004). Furthermore, the high level of stress among learners can have direct impact on the level of dropouts, loss of interest in studies, failures, depression, serious health problems, sleep and eating disorders, anxiety disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, loss of self-confidence and, in the worst case, suicides (Fisher, 1994; Whitman et al., 2000). In this context, it is important to stress that the university should understand the necessity of catering the needs of contemporary students

when it comes to mental health, and provide them with adequate psychological help on university campus.

The current study aims at contributing to the debate about the need for alleviating excessive levels of academic stress among university students in the Russian context. In the pursuit of this aim it is considered necessary first to provide the reader with an overview of the contemporary higher education system in Russia, as well as, to present a short analysis of the psychological health of Russian students. The next two paragraphs of this chapter are meant to provide a necessary background for this study.

1.1.1 The Russian higher education system

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the soviet higher education system had a recognized reputation worldwide. It was known for sophisticated teaching methods and scientific approaches that set the example for the systems of higher education in other countries (Kuzminov, 2004).

Nowadays, it is not easy to charge if the new era in the development of purely Russian higher education during the last two decades has brought more merits compared to the soviet one. On the one hand, most Russian universities are facing deteriorating learning and teaching conditions, lack of equipment and general education supplies, low teachers' salaries and lost of desire to learn in students (Abaskalova, 2000; Barisheva, 2004). On the other hand, such innovations as broad educational reforms, decentralization of management, increasing autonomy of universities, faculties and students, the creation of the private sector are targeted at ensuring formal recognition of the Russian system of higher education as equal to the western ones (Kuzminov, 2004). It is, therefore, seen important to emphasize this dual nature of contemporary Russian higher education system and take it into account while interpreting the findings of this study.

According to the regulations that guide Russian higher education presently, there are 3 types of educational institutions in the country: universities, academies and institutes. *Universities* constitute half of all higher education institutions and are leading research centers; *academies* conduct research mainly in one branch of science, technology or culture; *institutes* offer professional education programs. By the beginning of January 2009 there were more than three thousand higher education institutions in Russia including all state and

private institutions and their branches (according to the official website of the Russian Ministry of Education, 2009). This is 5 times more institutions compared to 514 higher educational institutions (all of them public) in the Soviet Union at the beginning of 1990s (Zaharov & Churekova, 2005). The unusual growth in the number of higher education institutions may be partly explained by the common world trend of massification of higher education which Russia has been witnessing the last two decades. Nowadays, there are around 7460 students attending higher education institutions in Russia, compared to 2824 in the beginning of the 1990s (according to the official website of the Russian Ministry of Education, 2009).

Today, students in Russia are guaranteed free access to higher education provided that they have completed secondary education and passed competitive entrance examinations. However, because of the limited quantity of places financed by the government, only the brightest ones who succeed in getting best grades at the entrance tests, have the right for tuition-free education and a scholarship; others start their studies as self-financed students and have to pay fees (nowadays they constitute about 2/3 of all college students) (according to the official website of the Russian Ministry of Education, 2009). This is one of the considerable changes in Russian higher education after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when everybody had the right for tuition-free education.

Indeed, Russian higher education has had to meet considerable challenges during the last two decades and is still going through a transitional period. The whole system of higher education has changed greatly due to the country's transition from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented economy (Bain, 1998; Rubtsov, 2007). This has had serious implications for the quality of education and in addition, has led to financial constraints and cuts in federal funding (Glazychev, 2004). Furthermore, such global trends as internationalization and globalization of higher education, together with Bologna process, have resulted in considerable progress towards Russia's successful integration into the global educational community (Bolotov, 2003). International exchanges of undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students, trainees and researchers at both intergovernmental and inter-ministerial levels have also been considerably expanded.

Yet, Russian diplomas are not recognized in the majority of advanced countries. This may be due to the fact that although bachelor and master degrees were introduced in Russia already in the 1990s, still only about one-tenth of graduates actually receive them (Krinchik, 2004). The majority of students are instead enrolled in the five-year programs and get a so-called

“specialist diploma” upon graduation. However, there are still on-going debates concerning Russian adaptation to the system of bachelor and master degrees, which is successfully established at the universities of many other countries of the world. The main argument in the discussion is a strong need for Russia to implement international agreements on recognition of qualifications, academic degrees and awards worldwide, thus, overcome isolation from world advanced knowledge (Barisheva, 2004; Zhouravliova, 2000).

Other top priority directions in the international and national policy of Russian higher education today include: unification of content throughout the country, development of regional and institutional centres for international cooperation and academic mobility, launching new student support financial programs, strengthening coordination between the labour market and higher education, as well as, achieving better quality of teaching and evaluation (Bain, 1998; Glazychev, 2004). These measures are expected to contribute to the competitiveness of Russian higher education in the international higher education space and, thus, to revival of once worldwide recognition of Russian intellectual power.

1.1.2 Psychological wellness of Russian higher education students

A shared view between many Russian researchers (Belinskaya, 2005; Iepishkin, 2008; Kartysheva, 2005; Kozlova, 2002) is that people's health in the Russian Federation has deteriorated drastically the last few decades. Some of the reasons for the growth of the number of unfavorable health tendencies among Russian population are deterioration in social and hygienic life conditions, rapid political and economical changes, low salaries, high unemployment rates, uncertainty in future prospects, loss of interest in sport, bad environment, unhealthy way of life, etc. (Barisheva, 2004; Kartysheva, 2005; Mendzeritskiy et al., 2001). General dissatisfaction with life conditions in the country results in aggression, depression, nervousness, fear for the future among large groups of the Russian population and these unhealthy emotional states are, unfortunately, becoming more and more widespread.

Furthermore, young generation is considered to be most susceptible and mentally vulnerable to the new life conditions (Kartysheva, 2005; Krinchik, 2004). Researchers argue that an educational institution has a most contradictory influence on young people even when the social and economics conditions in a country are on a high level (Zhouravliova, 2000). A mere fact of being enrolled in higher education by itself presupposes intellectual and

psychosomatic overload (Kozlova, 2002). This view is in line with heightened irritability, aggressiveness, anxiety, depression and stress among Russian students today which may result not only in students' sheer inability to be productive in their studies, but also lead to drop-outs and even suicidal tendencies (Zaharov & Churekova, 2005).

Speaking about the reasons of psychological disorders in college students, researchers (Barisheva, 2004; Iepishkin, 2008; Kartysheva, 2005; Plehanova, 2006) argue that students of many contemporary Russian universities are subjected to extreme intellectual and psycho-emotional overload, mental fatigue, crises of moral values, bad adaptation to the new conditions of studying, the necessity to move from home, numerous tests and exams, fear for future employment, fear for the future in general, frequent eating and sleeping disorders, ignorance on how to deal with stressful situation, lack of time for rest and outdoor activities. In addition, Russian students themselves maintain that there are a lot of things, influencing their psychological health, that need to be improved at the university (Kartysheva, 2005; Krinchik, 2004): the organization of classes and exams, inconvenient timetable, lack of information about organizational issues, strained contact between students and academics (particularly the informal contact), insufficient information about the organization and functioning of the university itself, lack of the information concerning the application of the chosen profession (*ibid.*).

The overall bad emotional and psychological state of Russian students can be also explained by some aspects peculiar to the Russian system of higher education (Barisheva, 2004). One of them is the age when most students start university life - 17 years old, right after finishing secondary school. At this young age a person is said to be still undergoing the process of organism formation, including development of the nerve-psychiatric functions, due to which a person might be more emotionally vulnerable and unstable (Kartysheva, 2005). Extreme intellectual overload at the Russian universities puts additional pressures on the nervous system of a still growing young organism. This accounts for the fact that students are considered to be most susceptible to negative changes in their environments and are under greater risk of developing mental health problems compared to other social groups (*ibid.*).

Moreover, studies (Abaskalova, 2000; Kartysheva, 2005) allege that students' ordinary day makes 10-14 hours (16-18 hours during the examination period) and is accompanied by less than 7-hour sleep. In addition, during examination periods most students have a very strong emotional stress which is accompanied by numerous functional disorders in the organism. Researchers (Abaskalova, 2000; Mendzeritskiy et al., 2001) argue that exams, tests, grades

lower than anticipated often lead to continuous anxiety and neuroses among Russian students.

Thus, psychological pressures seem quite pervasive in Russian students. Developing mental health disorders, high levels of stress and anxiety and acquiring emotional problems are almost considered by students to be usual consequences, if not conditions, of the higher education process. In this context, studies (Kozlova, 2002; Mendzeritskiy et al., 2001) point out the necessity of giving a priority to college students' emotional state on the federal level. On the one hand, exacerbation of mental health problems is likely to have serious implications on the individual level, that is, on students' academic achievement and proactive approach in acquiring knowledge. On the other hand, today's college students represent the future intellectual core of the country and will be in charge of Russia's competitiveness in the world arena in all spheres. Therefore, the importance of preserving Russian students' mental health shouldn't be underestimated (Kozlova, 2002).

1.2 Problem statement and purpose of the study

This study focuses on the issue of academic stress among students and aims at exploring how the question of students' psychological health is addressed at Pomor State University in the Russian Federation and the University of Oslo in Norway. The main incentive for choosing this research topic for a master thesis in Higher Education was my own 9-year experience as a student and lecturer at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, which set doubts in the appropriate treatment of the problem of academic stress among students on Russian campuses.

My personal preconceptions appeared to be in line with the studies of Russian researchers (Abaskalova, 2000; Belinskaya, 2005; Kozlova, 2002) who point out that nowadays many college students in Russia are at risk for developing serious psychological disorders due to the university practices and the psychological climate at higher education institutions. Examination anxiety, strained relationship with academics and limited contact with administration, which result in the feeling of uselessness and despair, are, unfortunately, the reality college students have to meet on a Russian campus (Iepishkin et al., 2008; Zaharov & Churekova, 2005). Such mental pressure at the university is believed to interfere not only in

students' overall academic achievement, but it may also have serious implications for learners' health and successful future (Zaharov & Churekova, 2005).

Thus, the seeming neglect of the perceived students' stress on behalf of higher education policy makers in Russia and the need for drawing attention to this serious issue, have lead to the conclusion about the necessity in this kind of study. Another important aspect in this context was the need to provide empirical evidence that confirm that the problem of mental health does exist on Russian higher education campuses.

Moreover, the analysis of the major aspects of interest among international studies in higher education shows that the issue of psychological wellness among youth, and particularly students, has been a topic of heated discussions for the past decades (for instance, works by Dutta et al., 2006; Eshun, 2006; Fisher, 1994; Howard et al., 2006; Kitzrow, 2003). The results of these studies leave no doubt that the issue of student's mental health is of high actuality and relevance for the contemporary higher education discourse.

Furthermore, this is also supported by the alarming results of national surveys around the world that report on students' severe anxiety disorders, suicidal tendencies, depression and other stress related problems. Researchers (Kadison, 2004; Martin et al., 2006; Palmer & Puri, 2006) argue that the extreme competitiveness of contemporary higher education, new pressures and expectations from the labour market and knowledge-based society, have put additional pressures on today's students which has had a direct impact on their psychological health.

In this respect, the role and key activities of traditional college counseling centres and campus mental health experts, working there, have become increasingly important in promoting mental wellness among students. That's why, the goal of this study is to trace how the issue of academic stress is addressed at the institutional level, namely, at Pomor State University in Russia, and to find out if there exists any form of student counseling at this university. The hypothesis of this study is that there is no centrally coordinated support structure aimed at the facilitation of psychological health among students at Pomor State University. If this is the reality, the important question, the study is supposed to answer, is: what are the reasons of the neglect of this important issue at the university level and what is the possibility of introducing a new student support structure on campus?

Another purpose of this study is to identify possible academic stressors among students of the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University and to find out the students' own

perception of the necessity of psychological counseling on Russian higher education campuses.

In this aspect, it would be of interest to compare the infrastructure of Pomor State University in Russia with a foreign university of a similar kind and trace the differences in introduced measures aimed at preventing the development and exacerbation of mental health problems in students. For this purpose, the University of Oslo (Norway) has been chosen to serve a possible example of the treatment of the issue of academic stress on campus.

To sum it up, this thesis is a case study of one of the Russian universities, Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, which will focus on the students' experience of academic stress and the treatment of the issue of excessive stress levels among students on behalf of the university administration. The case of the University of Oslo will be taken as an example of introducing a system of student support structures on university campus in order to alleviate unnecessary academic stress among learners.

Finally, it has to be stressed that this study does not focus on students with serious mental health problems such as psychiatric disorders (like Schizophrenia). The study is concentrated on non-clinical university population, that is, ordinary college students, who may acquire emotional disorders and stress-related problems, rather than any psychiatric disorders.

1.3 Research questions

The present study is aimed at exploring the issue of perceived levels of academic stress among learners and the university's role in fostering students' psychological well-being on campus. The overall question of the study is how the university administration and students of Pomor State University in Russia perceive the importance and necessity of having a varied student support structure on campus. In this framework, the following research questions were identified as the main ones for the present study:

1. How do the students of the faculty of foreign languages perceive the need for Russian students to have a psychological service on campus? What kind of psychological help do they need?
2. What is the role of the university in students' acquiring psychological problems on campus? How can students' mental health be facilitated by the university?

3. How is the issue of students' academic stress addressed at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk? What measures and support structures are introduced by the administration of the university in order to reduce academic stress in students?
4. What are the possibilities of introducing at Pomor State University support structures similar to those at the University of Oslo?

1.4 Potential significance of the study

One of the aims of the current study was to further a theoretical knowledge base on academic stress among college students. This helped to identify the lacuna in the previous studies on mental health issues among Russian students and the need to facilitate research and policies in this area. So far, no studies on college stress among Russian students, written in English, have been found. All available sources are in Russian, thus, they can't contribute to the international cooperation between higher education research in Russia and other countries of the world on the issue of psychological disorders in college students.

Hence, this study, written in English, is aimed at shedding light on the state of psychological health among Russian students which will, presumably, help foreign higher education specialists to get insight into this problem area in the Russian context. Furthermore, stressing the importance of facilitating the international exchange, this study can stimulate Russian researchers to publish their findings and conclusions on the issue of academic stress among students in the English language, rather than in Russian.

However, the main contribution of this study is seen to be drawing attention of the Russian higher education community to the necessity of implementing a series of measures and intervention strategies to alleviate unnecessary stress in students. Findings from my research may prove to be helpful in shaping changes in distribution of the priority of the university's needs by higher education administration. In other words, this study may contribute in two aspects: 1) *at the mesa (institutional) level* - it may facilitate a more student-oriented way of thinking on behalf of the administration, hence, facilitate new proactive measures in reshaping college infrastructure and introducing concrete prevention and intervention measures at the university; 2) *at the macro (governmental policies) level* - the study stresses the necessity to put the issue of students' mental health on the agenda in the affairs of higher education policy in the Russian Federation.

Amongst other contributions of this study is an attempt to look at the problem of students' academic stress from two theoretical angles by uniting the psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. The fact is that the previous research has concentrated on discussing the issue of academic stress among students within one of these two approaches, thus leaving out possible interpretations that would result from uniting them. This study, on the contrary, is aimed at looking at the research problem from both sides.

Finally, this study is directed at a range of audiences including university administration, deans of the faculties and university managers, Russian and international researchers and policy-makers in the sphere of higher education, as well as, college students and the whole Russian population who are concerned with the problem of academic stress among the young generation in contemporary Russia.

1.5 Limitations of the study

This study has its weaknesses and is limited on a number of accounts. First of all, it should be emphasized that this is a case study based on collective qualitative data. Thus, the primary limitation is that its results can not constitute the sufficient grounding for generalization of the research findings for the whole country. This is not only due to the large territorial extension of the Russian Federation and difficulties in applying and controlling the implementation of the national higher education policies at the institutional level. One should also take into consideration a lot of interwoven issues that are substantially different in different regions of the country, like regional governance, fiscal allocation and the ways the policies are put into practice. Hence, caution must be taken when generalizing the findings based on the fieldwork at just one of the numerous higher education institutions existing in the Russian Federation.

Another limitation is the restricted collection of data sources due to the limits of time and my temporary residence in the country other than where the fieldwork took place. This resulted in somewhat limited research on the Russian studies on the problem of psychological wellness among Russian students as many published materials could not be accessible. Thus, most of data were gathered with the help of the Internet recourses which, to some extent, can not account for the overall coverage of the research problem.

Furthermore, improvements could be made in a more equal differentiation of students who participated in the focus group discussions. The findings would have had greater reliability if students who are in the middle of their studies (3-year students) were also included into the interviews, beside freshmen and students in their last year at the university. Presumably, the last two groups are most susceptible to psychological disorders at the university; thus, it would be of interest to compare their perceptions of mental health issues on campus with the ones of students who have already overcome the stress of transition from secondary school to the university, but haven't yet been exposed to the anxiety of the final exams and worries about future employment.

1.6 Outline of the study

This study is composed of five main chapters, as follows:

Chapter 1 (current) – Introduction – provides a brief introduction to the contextual background of the study (the Russian higher education system and psychological wellness of Russian higher education students), as well as, discusses the motives for the study, research problem, research questions, limitations and contribution of the study.

Chapter 2 – Literature overview and theoretical framework – presents the overview of two theoretical perspectives relevant for this thesis, namely, individual psychological framework of the student and the interconnection between power, institution and individual at the university. Within the first theoretical perspective I'm going to concentrate on such issues as the concept of stress among college students, academic sources of stress, risk of developing psychological disorders at the university and functioning of counseling centers on campus. The second theoretical perspective will shed light on the concept of power and context at the university, the changing economic and social functions of higher education, the institutionalization of time, space and activity in the context of a higher education institution, and finally, the changing nature of the process of learning and assessment at the contemporary university.

Chapter 3 – Research methodology - discusses the chosen research method and its appropriateness for this study. In addition, such issues as research design, study settings and timing of the research, sample selection, the choice of case of the study and the procedures

for data collection and data analysis will be presented. In this chapter I will also concentrate on researcher's preconceptions, ethical considerations, validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter 4 – Presentation of the findings – provides the qualitative data gathered during the fieldwork at Pomor State University in Russia with the special focus on the findings from the interviews with the university's administration, faculty administration, policy implementers and students of the faculty of foreign languages. Such issues as perceived level of academic stress in students, the problem of students' adaptation to the university, the need for psychological help and the student psychological service on campus will be discussed. In addition, there will be given an overview of the student support structures at the University of Oslo with the discussion of the opportunity of introducing the same support structure at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk.

Chapter 5 – Discussions and conclusions – comprises the main conclusions based on the findings of the study. It also provides a link between the empirical findings and the theoretical grounding presented in Chapters 2, as well as, ideas for future research and suggestions for improvement that are believed to help to diminish stress levels among students at Pomor State University in Russia.

The thesis ends with concluding remarks to the whole study, list of references and two appendices: Appendix A – Interview guide and Appendix B – Student stress calendar.

2 Literature overview and theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

Studies assert that one can not deny the empowering effect of higher education on the individual (Mann, 2008; Reason et al., 2007). Higher education, being neither neutral nor natural, unavoidably influences people's lives. The two-sided potential of study at the university allows, on the one hand, to engage into learning experience and enrich the personality, and to alienate - on the other (Mann, 2008: 5). Moreover, higher education experience is said to be able to "diminish the individual, limit their potential and waste the opportunities" (*ibid.*). In addition, study, being a social practice, also influences the teachers' pedagogical practices and choices, as well as, their conceptions of teaching (Reason et al., 2007). Thus, one may conclude that pedagogic norms and contexts of the university restrict autonomy of both teachers and students, influencing the positive outcome of learning and resulting in psychological and social consequences for the individual.

Most studies, engaged into research on the impact of academic stress on students' subjective experience of higher education, use a psychological approach in order to explain sources of students' distress at the university. The main subject of this approach is the learner's mental individual peculiarities which are accountable for possible psychological discomfort at the university. However, what is often overlooked by this approach is the role of the institutional context in students' negative higher education experience which comprises organizational characteristics of the university, structures, practices, policies and environments which also include faculty, peers and members of administration (Reason et al., 2007). Thus, the psychological approach doesn't take into consideration the importance to include the social nature of the individual into the interplay between the individual and the university.

However, there are other approaches aimed at understanding students' stress advocated by some higher education researchers. Mann (2001; 2008) and Morrow & Torres (2002), for instance, allege that it is important to realize that the individual, pursuing higher education, is not isolated from "social relations, particular material conditions, cultural and discoursal contexts of the university, and the ways in which power permeates the teaching and learning practices" (Mann, 2008: 10). Hence, the analysis of established social structures at the university should be integrated into interpretation of subjective experience of college students (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

This thesis is an attempt to gain understanding of academic stressors among students through the lenses of both theoretical perspectives mentioned above: the individual/psychological theoretical perspective and the institutional/social one. These two approaches are seen as complementary ones, rather than contrasting. Thus, I believe that using both of them in discussing the findings of this study would broaden my perspective of looking at the research problem. Consequently, the theoretical framework for this thesis is based on two types of literature relevant for answering the research questions:

- 1) literature review on the role of individual peculiarities that are accountable for psychological disorders the student can acquire at the university, including literature on the range of psychological services for students on campus;
- 2) literature that presents a theoretical concept of power relations within the university as a source of mental distress of the student.

The current chapter starts with the overview of the literature on the research within the individual psychological framework of the student which will be followed by the research on the interconnection between power, institution and individual. Given the choice of the case of study and limitation of the research area, this chapter will aim to explore the following issues:

- within the framework of the research on individual psychological framework of the student: the diversity of the definitions of stress and general overview of sources of stress afflicting college students, with particular emphasis on academic stress. Furthermore, I will focus on the importance of establishing college counseling services and interventions at the university in order to address the problem of student stress;
- within the framework of the research on the interconnection between power, university and individual: the concept of power, changes in the economic and social functions of the university and, influenced by them, changed nature of learning process and assessment. Afterwards, I will trace the interdependence of the concepts of power and context at a higher education institution and how their interconnection affects the institutionalisation of time, space and activity at the university.

2.2 Research on individual psychological framework of the student

2.2.1 Introduction

Review of the literature on stress among college students indicates that this topic has been studied extensively during the last decades. Most studies have focused on such general issues as stress, its effect on human health and cognitive functions, coping strategies, vulnerability to stress-related illnesses and consequences from chronic stress. As for the concept of stress in academic environments, researchers have mainly concentrated on stress in academic staff, assessment of the prevalence of psychological states among college students, anxiety while communicating with instructors and peers, the interrelation of the level of students' stress and the academic performance, as well as, the interconnection between stress and adjustment to the university life.

What unites most of the findings is the importance of the concept of stress in affairs of higher education policy and its relevance to the discussions about students' well-being and successful academic performance. Higher education, as such, is reported to be a precondition to bringing forth considerable amounts of psychological disorders in college students (Mann, 2008; Reason et al., 2007). In addition, the results of recent national surveys around the world leave no doubt that contemporary college students are more vulnerable to psychological disorders compared with other groups of population, which in its turn stresses the necessity of giving top priority to mental health on campus.

2.2.2 The definition of stress

On the one hand, stress is hard to define because individuals react differently to it. A situation stressful for one person may not be perceived as such by another (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Fisher, 1994; Peelo, 1994). In the university context there may be a variety of different responses to one and the same situation on the part of different students - from feeling uncomfortable and lacking confidence in the face of academic challenges to panic and terror (Peelo, 1994; Whitman et al., 2000). Moreover, studies underline that stress shouldn't be understood in a negative sense only; the so-called positive stress motivates students to action and encourages learning (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Martin et al., 2006; Whitman et al., 2000).

Even today there is no collectively accepted definition of stress among researchers. Thus, it is of interest to trace how this concept has evolved through the years. The word itself, meaning “hardship, straits, adversity, affliction”, is of Latin origin and has been in use in the English language since the 14th century (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006). However, the concept of stress is relatively new and was first outlined in the late 1930s by Hans Selye, who defined stress as a “mere nonspecific response of the body to any demand” (Selye, 1936, in Dutta et al., 2006: 4). This definition stressed *the physiological theory* of stress which was afterwards doubted by some researchers.

As a result, in the 1950s a *psychological* concept of stress was put forward by some of them (Grinker & Spiegel, 1945, & Janis, 1958, in Dutta et al., 2006: 4), focusing on stress as a psychological process. According to this theory, stress was defined as a “mental reaction which arises when there is a perceived imbalance between the demands placed on a person on one hand and their abilities on the other hand” (Grinker & Spiegel, 1945, in Dutta et al., 2006: 4). It is of interest to note that neither of the above mentioned definitions (the ones of Selye and of Grinker & Spiegel) underlines any positive or negative reaction in a body as a response to this demand which we nowadays associate “stress” with.

The paradigm shift in the 1970s with contribution of such social researchers as Levin and McGrath turned to exploration of social courses of stress and the result of the interaction of social environment and the human psyche. This paradigm provided the grounding for the theory of individual perceptions of what is a stressful situation mentioned earlier in this abstract. As stated by McGrath (1974, in Fisher, 1994: 3), stress is created by an “imbalance between the *demand* or environmental pressure and the *capacity to meet that demand*” (*ibid.*).

For this study it was decided to use the multidimensional concept of stress that defines this concept as a “mismatch” between the individuals and their environments” (Whitman et al., 2000: 162), or, in other words, as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 19). According to this most accepted theory, stress is believed to be primarily a feeling of unease or discomfort by the person undergoing stress and this feeling could be physical, mental and/or social:

Stress arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984: 17).

The important thing in this definition is that it is people's thoughts and perceptions of the situation, but not a situation itself that causes stressful reactions in individuals. For example, in the university context, it is not necessarily the external pressure of the course work deadline which causes stress, but whether a student believes that he/she can complete the course work in the time allocated (Palmer & Puri, 2006). Thus, our stress levels are mainly influenced by our own perceptions of a situation and our individual response to stress (Fisher, 1994).

2.2.3 Stress in university students

As mentioned earlier in the introduction to this chapter, for many reasons the university students are more prone to develop stress (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jabri, 2006; Howard et al., 2006; Palmer & Puri, 2006). Eshun (2006) asserts that if there is one word that college students use most, it is "*stress*". In fact, college student population have been documented as having been exposed to potentially traumatic events at rates of 80 to 84 % , whereas the rest of population rate is 60% (a study on American population, Hayman, 1999, in Robinson et al., 2006: 204).

Additionally, there is abundance of studies that show that the majority of students score high while being measured psycho-emotional distress that leads to poor academic performance. This applies to different groups of students: first year college students (Ko et al., 1999, in Al-Sharbati & Al-Jabri, 2006: 70), health profession students (Dutta et al., 2006; Singh, 2006), female students (Sandanger et al., 2004, in Al-Sharbati & Al-Jabri, 2006: 70; Yager & O'Dea, 2006), adult students (Boyston & Blair, 2006; Kirby et al., 2006), college students in general (Eshun, 2006; Martin et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2006).

Many researchers (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Kadison, 2004; McDonald et al., 2006) conclude that because of the increased selectivity of universities, compared to the past, today's college students are more likely to be exposed to mental health disorders than a couple of decades ago. This is also documented by a number of quantitative and qualitative

surveys, newly administered by some American institutions that have provided important insight into emotional state of college students. For instance, the American College Health Association (ACHA) (Howard et al., 2006) showed that issues of mental health have become more relevant to today's college students who are being diagnosed with more severe psychological problems than past generations. The rise in the amount of students reporting a diagnosis of depression has increased by 3,1 percent from 10,3 % in 2000 to 13,4 % in 2003 (Howard et al., 2006: 92).

Furthermore, a survey by The Cooperative Institutional Research Program in the US in 2000 (Andrews & Wilding, 2004, in Robinson et al., 2006: 206) reported 28% of freshman who stated that they frequently feel overwhelmed, and 8% reported feeling depressed (*ibid.*). Another survey conducted by the same institution summarized the following results: 61% of college students reported feeling hopeless, 45% said that they felt so depressed that they could barely function, and 9% felt suicidal (Voelker, 2003, in Howard et al., 2006: 93). Similar trends are documented by a more recent study completed in March 2008 by the Associated Press (Mental Health Weekly, 2008, in Howard et al., 2006: 93) which reported the following figures: 50% of all college students felt so depressed they could not function, 58% reported feeling anxious and 34% reported having felt depressed in the past three months (*ibid.*).

Moreover, studies allege that stress at the university can even lead to such serious life decisions as committing a suicide. Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (1997, in McDonald et al., 2006: 228) reported that 10% of college students have seriously thought about attempting suicide, 7% have actually made a suicide attempt and 2% made an attempt serious enough to require medical treatment (*ibid.*).

These unhealthy tendencies among college students are also supported by the results of some Russian studies. High incidence of anxiety and emotional strain on Russian higher education campuses are proved by several recent national surveys. The one by Belinskaya (2005: 19), for instance, reports that 87% of students under probation in the Kaluga State University were exposed to stress (*ibid.*). A study by Iepishkin et al. (2008: 2), conducted among 637 students in the Southern Russia, identified 31% percent of aggressive students who easily undergo conflicts, whereas 19% have lost appetite, 17% always feel tired, 11% feel hostile and suspicious, 9% are suffering from insomnia and have problems with communication, 5% are most of the time in a bad mood (*ibid.*). Another finding of this study is that 16% of students are under stress for weeks (Iepishkin et al., 2008: 2). Similar results have been

reported by a survey of 100 freshmen in one of the universities of Saint-Petersburg which identified 48% of students with a high level of anxiety, 41% with a medium level of anxiety and only 11% - with a low one (Mendzeritskiy et al., 2001: 68).

However, these results of national surveys appear not as alarming as the findings of the studies that aimed at answering the question how Russian college students solve their emotional problems. 34% of freshmen and 8% of senior students in the study by Abaskalova (2000: 34) thought that alcohol is a good way of reducing stress at the university. Findings of Iepishkin et al. (2008: 3) report on 14% of respondents who had the same view. Smoking and drugs are also considered by Russian college students to be helpful in stress-buffering (Iepishkin, 2008; Krinchik, 2004).

Furthermore, Russian researchers allege that student's health deteriorates drastically with the amount of years spent at the university (Abaskalova, 2000; Kozlova, 2002): 65% of college students think their health has been worsened compared with the start of their studies at the university (Kozlova, 2002: 67). This is supported by some American studies which concluded that during the college years the level of depression and stress increases whereas emotional and physical health decline (Howard et al., 2006).

Thus, findings of both international and Russian studies leave no doubt that the issue of mental health among today's college students should be taken seriously by universities' administration and college counseling centres. As a matter of fact, 85% of college counseling centres reported a greater amount of students with more serious psychological problems in year 2001 in comparison with previous years (Palmer & Puri, 2006: 193). Moreover, a shared view between the researchers is that students' mental health must be addressed not only on the institutional, but first and foremost on the national level (Howard et al., 2006; Kitzrow, 2003).

As mentioned above, one of the main reasons for increased stress levels among contemporary college students is that they are more driven to succeed than any generation before them. Starting university life as such sets up new pressures and expectations students must follow up in order to be competitive in the academic work (Kadison, 2004). First of all, students have to adapt themselves to the new style of study, more demanding in comparison with secondary school (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Martin et al., 2006; Palmer & Puri, 2006). Migration, resulting break of family relationships and lost of support on the part of close relatives, are also likely to influence students' psychological state. Additionally,

academic demands vary by the nature of profession (Howard et al., 2006). Some stressors are common across fields of study; others are particular to a field.

Presumably, many of these pressures are out of the control of university faculty and administration. Nevertheless, there are measures under university's responsibility and ability to create university environments that would foster students' well-being and decrease the level of stress (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Howard, 2006; McDonald et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2006). However, some researchers suggest that institutions of higher education "have failed their students in respect to mental health by focusing solely on university goals rather than on addressing the potential mental health problems among students" (McDonald et al., 2006: 227). In addition, several studies conclude that some academic institutions may actually be attempting to avoid the problem of stress in students by attracting academically and psychologically successful students, thus potentially eliminating "problem students" (Shea, 2002, in McDonald et al., 2006: 227). Therefore, researchers allege that "efforts should be made to try to "fix" the institutions themselves instead of trying to "fix" problem students" (Tinto, 1993, in McDonald et al., 2006: 227).

No doubt, institutions of higher education should be responsible and able to create healthy environments where students are less likely to develop mental health problems (Howard, 2006). It is necessary, that the entire institution of higher education adopts the attitude that student mental health is an important and legitimate concern of everybody involved in the process of higher education - administrators, faculty and staff (Kitzrow, 2003: 26). In this context the active support of top-level administrators, financial as well, is critical in addressing the issue of mental health among students.

Furthermore, researchers in the area of stress among students (Howard et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006) argue that there is a sharp need for prevention and intervention efforts on behalf of the university administration. In this respect, there is abundance of opportunities the university can use in order to secure mental health of its students (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Howard et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006):

- curriculum development that presupposes reduction in information overload;
- assessment of students' psychological background, motivation, willing to study and personality type before the admission in order to be provided with additional support;

-
- prevention workshops and programs for students at risk for depression where they can increase the awareness about stress and learn about such behavioural strategies as time management, problem solving, interpersonal skills, etc.;
 - elective courses which teach skills how to manage anger, prevent anxiety and depression, and build self-esteem;
 - courses in generic cognitive skills.

Researchers (Howard et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006) argue that all these methods significantly reduce the level of anxiety and lower symptoms of depression among college students. Moreover, it's not just courses and intervention measures, offered by the university, which can help solving students' psychological problems. Properly prepared faculty and peers, advising services, student health centres, fraternities (for instance buddy groups) and sororities could offer similar interventions (Howard et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006). Facilitating faculty responsiveness to students' needs, developing peer and faculty mentoring programs and providing adequate advising that addresses psychological concerns may considerably reduce stress in college students (McDonald et al., 2006).

One of the prerequisites for successful functioning of intervention measures which could be introduced by the university is the awareness of multiple stressors impacting today's students at college. These are presented in the next paragraph of this chapter.

2.2.4 Sources of stress (stressors)

Most of the above mentioned definitions of stress suggest that there is always a demand or pressure that evokes a certain body reaction. In fact, there exist several different classifications of this demand, called "*stressor*" or "*psycho-social stressor*" in the literature. For instance, Al-Sharbati and Al-Jarbi (2006: 71) subdivide them in two groups: *internal*, that is, from the human being (like different diseases, acute or chronic), and *external*, from the environment (such as, for example, work problems, family disharmony, study difficulties, exams, boring lifestyles, etc.). This subdivision is especially helpful to realize the difference between internal and external pressures, the later being the focus of this study.

However, Ross and Niebling (1999, in Howard et al., 2006: 96) suggest a more specific classification of stressors that are particularly afflicting college students. In their survey four categories of potential stressors in university students are identified:

- 1). Intrapersonal (for example, change in sleeping or eating habits, change in use of alcohol or drugs, speak in public);
- 2). Interpersonal (roommate conflicts, problems with girlfriend/boyfriend or parents);
- 3). Academic (change in major, increased class overload, lower grade than anticipated, exams);
- 4). Environmental (computer problems, bad living conditions).

The distribution of the responses among the four groups of stressors was as follows: 38 % - were intrapersonal, 28 % - environmental, 19 % - interpersonal, 15 % - academic. Though, judging from this survey, the percentage of academic pressures may seem relatively low compared to the others, several studies (Dutta et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2006) report that it is academic pressures which are among the five most frequently listed stressors among students. Furthermore, they are directly correlated with the other types of stressors and have a direct impact on them.

The fact that academic stressors are in close interplay with all enumerated groups of stressors, influenced the decision on the topic of this study. Thus, in the following paragraph I will concentrate on academic stressors which may interfere with students' ability to be successful in the face of academic challenges. Another reason for having chosen to address academic stressors is that they may be prevented, or at least attenuated by the university, whereas others can not be avoided (McDonald et al., 2006).

2.2.4.1 Academic pressures

Researcher (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Kadison, 2004) argue that contemporary college students are much more susceptible to developing emotional disorders due to a high selectivity of today's higher education institutions, as well as, to increased demands on students as learners and researchers. Most common academic pressures among students identified by the researchers (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Dutta et al., 2006; Grini, 1999;

Howard et al., 2006; Kadison, 2004; Mann, 2008; Palmer & Puri, 2006; Raaheim, 1991) can be divided in three groups:

1. Students' first meeting with the university:

- unrealistic academic expectations;
- transition and adjustment to college life;
- feelings of a mismatch between oneself and college;
- feelings of powerlessness;
- lack of leisure time;
- long studying hours.

2. Students' academic abilities and responsibility:

- to master an extensive knowledge base within a time frame;
- to being able to work to deadlines;
- to be responsible for ones' own studies;
- to be able to have multiple assignments;
- to compete over grades;
- to compete with peers;
- to have less control on behalf of the teachers;
- to take and study for exams;
- fear to be disgraced and embarrassed if one fails exam;
- uncertainty of career choice and future prospects.

3. Intrapersonal relations with the faculty and the quality of teaching:

- strained relationship with the faculty;
- lack of timely feedback;
- lack of faculty response to students' needs;
- lack of personal attention by professors;
- poor quality of teaching.

Naturally, these pressures vary according to the amount of time students have spent at the university. Thus, first-year college students are more likely to struggle with transition and adjustment to college life while senior students must content with uncertainty of career choice and future prospects due to a changing job market. In addition, academic demands vary by the nature of academic training and are dependant on the field of study (Whitman et al., 2000).

One of the main challenges students face from the moment they enter university is the principle of “*academic freedom*” which is completely new and unknown for school-leavers (Raaheim, 1991). The patterns, adopted by most individuals at school, are no longer suitable for the idea of full responsibility for one’s own studies at the university. Therefore, the role of a teacher is a crucial one. Teachers should be well aware of the fact that before entering the university most students have not already had all the skills needed for effective university learning (Raaheim, 1991: 63). Studies (Palmer & Puri, 2006) conclude that often the brightest students lose a sense of perspective while starting academic life at the university.

This is proved by recent studies conducted among college dropouts (Howard et al., 2006) which suggest that some students experience a feeling of a mismatch between themselves and their college. Thus, dropping out during the first years represents a strategy for eliminating a problem of finding the right approach to successful studies (Howard et al., 2006).

Moreover, such students who used to be tops in high school and who are very focused on grades feel more stress than other students. They don’t enjoy learning for learning’s sake and are less willing to take courses they are not comfortable with in fear to get low grades (Kadison, 2004). Thus, stress can interfere with students’ learning experiences and consequently, causes poor academic achievement (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006). Moreover, many students are not aware of the fact that in addition to studying, daily exercise, nutritious food, adequate sleep and good friends are necessary for academic success (Kadison, 2004; Howard et al., 2006). Studying too much and too long, students become more susceptible to depression. Thus, effective time management and leisure satisfaction would be an important factor in reducing academic stress among students.

However, some researchers claim that stress is not only normal in life, but also necessary (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006; Palmer & Puri, 2006). In their view, a certain amount of stress and anxiety can provide valuable stimulus for students to study and prepare, otherwise

they might not make themselves put best efforts in studying (Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006). On the other hand, pressure begins to turn into stress when individuals no longer perceive that they can cope with the difficult situation they are in. Hence, anxiety and fear can become uncontrolled and are likely to impede students' normal cognitive functions needed for successful academic work (Fisher, 1994; Palmer & Puri, 2006). It is important, therefore, to emphasize that college students need to control the level of their stress, and the university is the one to assist them in acquiring necessary skills in order to do so.

2.2.5 College counseling services

As reported by Martin et al. (2006: 150), the institution of higher education has an obligation to "actively reduce the stress in students created by policies and procedures" (*ibid.*). In fact, many universities today do have infrastructure including college counseling centres and mental health personnel to assist students who have mental health problems (Kitzrow, 2003; McDonald et al., 2006). However, although student support structures may exist on many campuses, their staff may not be able to meet the demand for their services due to the increased diversity of today's students (including minorities, foreign students, female students, adult students) (Martin et al., 2006). Furthermore, the level of severity of students' concerns nowadays is much greater than it used to be, having changed from problems of adjustment and individuation in the 1950s-1960s to suicidality, substance abuse and depression among contemporary students (Kitzrow, 2003).

Typically, college counseling centres are staffed by trained mental health professionals who are prepared to address most common psychological problems among students that can interfere with student's social and academic activities. These include depression, stress, isolation, eating disorders, suicidal feelings and personal problems (Kadison, 2004; Peelo, 1994; McDonald et al., 2006; Al-Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006). However, in spite of the acknowledgement that these centres do a valuable work, higher education institutions can't solely rely on them to help maintain students' mental health (McDonald et al., 2006).

Traditionally, college counseling services were aimed at developmental and preventative counselling, but gradually these roles have evolved from simply providing information to treatment and diagnosing (Kitzrow, 2003). Furthermore, McDonald et al. (2006) allege that, unfortunately, nowadays, most of these mental health services on campus seem to be just treatment-oriented, that is, they are deliberately created to assist students who have already

developed at least some level of psychological dysfunction. In other words, the preventive structures of today counseling services are either not in place or are underdeveloped (McDonald et al., 2006: 228).

What is suggested by today's researchers (Howard et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006) is the necessity of changing the activities of college counseling centres towards preventative interventions on college campuses aiming to help individual students develop proactive behaviours and coping strategies. Such intervention measures can be established both at the individual level, by teaching students ways how to develop strong study and time management skills, and at the institutional level, by offering structural resources to help promote student mental wellness (Howard et al., 2006).

According to McDonald et al. (2006: 226), stress can not be eliminated from the college experience; however, efforts on behalf of faculty, administrators and campus mental health experts may help students decrease the impact of stress on their college life. Studies (Turner and Berry, 2000, in McDonald, 2006: 229) confirm that 60% of students reported that counseling was helpful to improve their academic performance and 50% said that it helped them leave aside intention to drop out of school (*ibid.*).

However, researchers (McDonald et al., 2006; Sharbati & Al-Jarbi, 2006) state that very few students, experiencing any mental discomfort, seek help at college counseling centres. This is due to the fact that they either do not know they exist or because of prejudices about seeking mental help (Corrigan et al., 2000, in McDonald, 2006: 228). Moreover, a study conducted by Kirby et al. (2006) concluded that being less available on the weekend, they reduce the possibility for certain groups of students (for instance, adult learners) to use them if they need help and support.

The latter obstacle may be addressed by such measures as more immediate and accessible appointments, phone consultations, evening and drop-in appointments (Kitzrow, 2003: 30). Besides, in order to serve more students counseling centres may use peer counsellors or graduate interns as a useful resource during the weekends or days-off (*ibid.*). As for the students' unawareness about the existence of mental health centres on campus and reluctance in asking help there, this could be solved by better advertising, on-line assessment and screening directly in students' residences which could also ensure high levels of confidentiality (McDonald et al., 2006: 229). The information provided by on-line

assessment, for instance, can help identify students experiencing psychological problems which can be followed up by counseling centre staff (for instance by e-mail).

Moreover, it's not only students that can be the target group for campus counseling centres. In addition, mental health experts can serve as educators for administrators, faculty and staff in terms of providing them with information about how to recognize troubled students who possibly need mental health (Kitzrow, 2003: 28). Researchers (Kitzrow, 2003; McDonald et al., 2006) argue that this may help increase the awareness of everyone involved in the process of higher education about the psychological problems students meet at the university.

In addition, student support structures could develop special orientation courses to provide new-comers with information on how to adjust to the campus experience and seek assistance for a wide range of academic and personal issues (McDonald et al., 2006: 231). Some of institutions have launched this kind of programs for their new students which represent the type of proactive, preventative measures necessary for students in order to avoid mental health problems (*ibid.*). The Buddy system at the University of Oslo, Norway, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 (4.3.3), can serve as an example for such type of interventions.

2.3 The interconnection between power, institution and individual

2.3.1 The concept of power at the university

Some higher education researchers argue that many of their colleagues build research on the assumption that the university is normal and neutral in its institutional practices, norms and conditions. However, Mann (2008: 9) asserts that in this case, it would be challenging to understand such common institutional practices as students' engagement and alienation. In the researcher's view, "hidden workings of the institution" and power, which operates within it, are responsible for negative and positive influence on the individual's self-esteem, fulfillment of their potential as a learner, choice of copying strategies and study approaches" (Mann, 2008: 10). Thus, it is more appropriate to look at the institution of higher education as a multi-faceted and multi-colored rather than neutral.

The concept of power, used by Mann (2001, 2008), enables to consider the university as a society with a wide system of power relations. According to the author, higher education is “implicated in relations of power within society” whereas the way it is organized, is a result of “social and historical choices” (Mann, 2008: 5). On entering the university the individuals with their personal psychological experiences place themselves within an institutional context with unavoidable relations of power. Thus, the subjective experience of the individual student is predetermined by the social world of a particular educational institution with its cultural peculiarities (*ibid.*). In other words, differences in power in the form of various relations of domination between particular groups influence the individuals’ experience at the university (Morrow & Torres, 2002: 22).

Therefore, in order to understand students’ perception of higher education process, it is important to look at the inter-relationship between the individual, power and the university (Mann, 2008; Morrow & Torres, 2002). While doing so, some researchers assert the relevance of the term “alienation” which is defined as “the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved” (Oxford English Dictionary). In educational terms this can mean the learners’ estrangement from the subject and process of study which they should be involved in (Mann, 2001: 8). Many practices at the university such as, for example, assessment practices, imposed studying conditions with greater focus on efficiency and performativity, alienate learners from their own natural learning process (Mann, 2008: 117).

Moreover, researchers argue that the learner doesn’t act in isolation at the university (Mann, 2001, 2008; Morrow & Torres, 2002). The educational society, with its power inequalities, affects students and exposes them to the requirements of the teacher and educational system (Mann, 2001; 2008). In other words, “the pedagogic context itself is likely to be exerting power over students by limiting their freedom through workload demands, restrictive and predictable assessment tasks, prescribed teaching methods” (Ramsden, 1997: 203). Moreover, the effect of power within the university may be demonstrated by the fact that the students are anxious about how the others judge them (Mann, 2008: 23).

Some researchers in the area of higher education assert that the concept of power is interconnected with the student’s sense of confidence and a greater sense of control over their own studies (Morgan & Beaty, 1997, in Mann, 2008: 30) which in their turn give students greater responsibility for their learning. On the contrary, such possible institutional conditions as privilege, social isolation, impersonality, hierarchical social relations,

workload, assessment, academic discourse and a culture of expertise may lead to students' alienation and frustration with the higher education in general (Mann, 2008; Trow, 1970).

Mann (2008: 6) suggests that there are different contextual layers through which power is mediated and which influence students' interaction with the university. These layers which include social and economic functions of the university in society, structuring of time, space and activity at college and university's discursual practices and assessing functions (*ibid.*), will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

2.3.2 The changing economic and social functions of higher education

Higher education has experienced great changes in its practices and management during the last decades, mostly due to the changes in economic and social conditions in almost all countries of the world (Castells, 2001; Cloete & Maassen, 2002; De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2003). Transition to a knowledge-based economy with its emphasis on the paramount use of knowledge, the availability and use of information and communication technology is seen as an important pre-requisite for a country's economic growth and social development (Cloete et al., 2005; Salminen, 2003). Contemporary tertiary education institutions, through advanced training of skilled scientists and generation of research, perform essential role in supporting knowledge-driven economic growth strategies and a country's transition to a knowledge-based economy (Mora & Vila, 2003).

Hence, the relationship between the state and the higher education sector has changed (Castells, 2001). Studies (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2003; Scott, 1998) argue that because of the increased competitiveness and marketization of the society, the state expects higher education institutions to function business-like. Universities have to respond quickly and effectively to new pressures such as the contraction of public financial resources, increased demands on teaching and research, market requirements, technology transfer (Amaral et al., 2003; Cloete & Maassen, 2002; De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2003).

Thus, in order to face public funding constraints, on the one hand, and the country's need in the number of knowledgeable individuals, on the other, universities have been forced to enlarge their income by increasing the number of students entering higher education

(Castells, 2001; Scott, 1998). The growth of enrollments and the movement toward universal higher education have made enrollment in college increasingly obligatory for many students. Glazychev (2004) and Kodin (1996) claim that these societal pressures influence students, even deprive them of their own choice in life and nearly make them enter a university against their will.

Moreover, researchers (Fusarelli and Johnson, 2004; Scott, 1998) argue that massification of higher education has resulted in such challenges as increasing dissatisfaction with the condition of education among the public, the necessity of efficient teaching a much larger student population, introducing new subjects, as well as, having to deal with the minority of those students who have scholarly ambitions and the majority of those who see higher education as an instrument of getting a good job in the future.

Furthermore, because of the growing size of the student population and societal expectations of greater efficiency and greater accountability, universities become larger and take on multiple missions (Castells, 2001; Scott, 1998). The increase at the university size leads to the necessity of a new way of managing the university, namely, managing a higher education institution as a large, complex organization rather than as a loosely-coupled aggregation of separate faculties and departments (Scott, 1998).

In addition, widening access has resulted not only in massing of students into larger lecture halls, but also in increasing numbers of “non-traditional”/non-standard students entering higher education (Bridge, 2006). More and more working-class entrants, as well as, students of diverse age, racial and ethnic backgrounds enter universities nowadays (Ashwin, 2006). The diversity of these groups who are wishing to study at the university accounts for different standards of achievement and variable abilities. Moreover, they do not only have to adapt themselves to the new context of academic culture, but also to survive in alien social conventions and practices of the traditional class students (Bridge, 2006).

Consequently, many teachers nowadays complain that the “quality” of incoming students in their opinion is reducing each year. Academics assert that the level of students’ general skills is low, that learners are unable to work independently and lack initiative (Fusarelli and Johnson, 2004; Glazychev, 2004). Many school graduates are not prepared for the university studies; they don’t cope with the amount of work which they have to face and are not accustomed to the system of learning in a higher education institution in general.

Hence, for many non-traditional students the encounter with the university may become alienating (Erlich, 2004, in Mann, 2008: 76). In this aspect, studies (Bridge, 2006; Scott, 1998) argue that it is important that universities address this issue by revising their courses in terms of content and delivery.

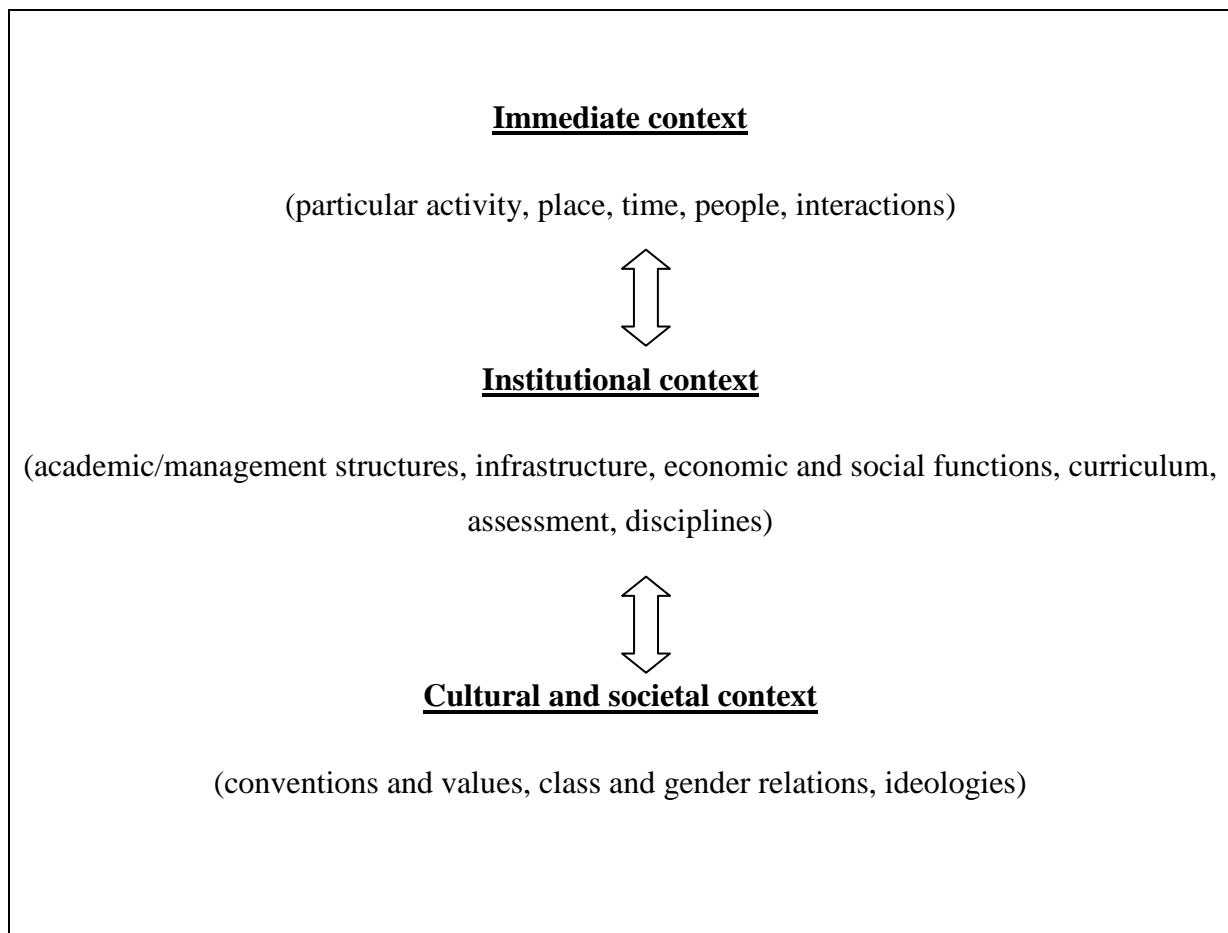
At the same time, due to the so-called “marketisation” of higher education and commodification of academic knowledge students have started to be seen as the consumers of universities’ products (McLaren, 2003, in Mann, 2008: 71; Scott, 1998; Tlili & Wright, 2005, in Mann, 2008: 71). Nowadays, students perceive themselves as “receivers of a service in return for a monetary investment” (Tlili & Wright, 2005, in Mann, 2008: 73) and demand greater value for money (Scott, 1998). This has resulted in the students’ changed attitude to higher education in general and to the learning process in particular.

To sum it up, researchers argue that all these changes in higher education management and practices have resulted in students and academics’ resentment and feeling of frustration and alienation from a higher education institution (Mann, 2001; 2008). The contemporary university is seen as a provider of services and facilities rather than an institution which is eager to help the individual’s concerns. In addition, there are other processes that contribute to the growing frustration with the academic life among the higher education community. The following paragraphs of this chapter are meant to shed light on the workings of institutional practices that can be accountable for the different educational experience among university students.

2.3.3 The context and power at the university

Mann (2008) takes the view that in order to understand individual experience of the student it is not enough to look at the immediate context of the situation (Mann, 2008: 58). In her opinion, it is necessary to place it in institutional context which, in its turn, is subject to the cultural and societal context. Thus, there are three layers of context, presented in the following table, one should be aware of while discussing students’ subjective experience at the university.

Table 2.1 Contextual layers at the university



Mann (2008) argues that every single interaction or situation the student finds themselves in is shaped by: 1) specific characteristics, personal values of the participants; 2) institutional practices, social and pedagogic norms; 3) societal social and economic relations and norms. Thus, every context within the university needs to be seen at as interplay of these various factors that are realized at each level but interpenetrate into each other (Mann, 2008: 58).

Moreover, it's not only a wider context that influences the narrower one (for instance, the institutional context influences the immediate one), but their relationship is dialectical (Mann, 2008: 59). That is, the immediate context can affect the institutional one which, in its turn, can have effects on the whole society. Thus, Mann (2008) asserts that students should not be regarded as passive participants of the context within a higher education institution. In spite of the fact that the context does determine their actions and influences their capacity to contribute to particular practices within the university, learners can change the institutional and societal context too. Due to human ability to reflect upon the situation, upon one's own and others' actions and practices, students and academics change the context which, in its

turn, changes them (Mann, 2008: 60). There is therefore a circle of constant mutual reshaping between the individual and the context at the university - on the micro level - and society - on the macro one.

As much as context is inseparable from the individual experience at the university, power is always implicated within context and is operating at every context level, described above (Mann, 2008: 67). In Mann's view (2008) the following workings of power emphasize the inter-relationship between power and context in higher education and are present at every institution (Mann, 2008: 65):

- Power is directly or indirectly present in relations between members of the university (for instance, academics and students) due to their position; teachers are given excessive power over their students through the practice of assessment;
- Academics do not straightforwardly control their students; such study activities as lectures, seminars, exams, essays constitute techniques of power that contribute to subjectivity of teachers and students;
- Different people have different access to material and social resources (indirect power);
- Particular ways of thinking and acting among dominant classes are spread at the university (for instance, the widely spread view among academics that some students do not have the intellectual competence to succeed);
- Any interaction within the group, between teacher and students, and students and students, is able to result in a shift of power;
- Students also exhibit some power through being seen as "consumers" of higher education the last decades. This has changed student-teacher relationships and teachers' practices which are now influenced by greater public accountability and student evaluations of teaching; thus, both students and academics have a mutual influence on each other in terms of power;
- Specific social and pedagogic practices within the university, curriculum, assessment and disciplinary practices form an academic culture that presupposes specific ways of behavior and interacting among students and academics; this culture in its turn influences the wider context, namely societal one, by contributing to ideologies, discourses economic and social relations.

As shown above, there are many different ways power operates within a higher education institution. Power is influenced by the multiplicity of interests of different groups presented at the university which are operating at the same time. Thus, a higher education institution represents a hierarchical set of social relations where different positions are associated with different roles in the institution and are valued differently by different groups (Mann, 2008: 87). Together with context these workings of power expose higher education students to a standardized environment with standardized behavior which is also influenced by the institutionalization of time, space and activity and the changing nature of the process of learning and assessment, discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.3.4 The institutionalization of time, space and activity

Amongst other things, contemporary higher education institutions are characterized by the institutionalization of time, space and activity through particular ways of organizing timetable, organized curricular results, the conventional duration of degree programs, semesters, amount of lectures and seminars (Mann, 2008). Tasks and topics, studied within a program, are also timed and sequenced in particular ways. This results in the fact that at contemporary universities there is a risk that busy work replaces actual engaged learning and understanding and learning becomes “non-learning” (Mann, 2008: 94).

In this context, students have very little control over how things are functioning at a higher educational institution. By entering the university, the individuals do not only take up a certain social position, but they also give up a certain amount of control over their own learning and social life (Mann, 2008: 93). They give up their autonomy and freedom and responsibility for oneself (*ibid.*). All control over activities is left to the institution itself and the academics while the students don't have any control over their own fate (Goffman, 1996, in Mann, 2008: 87). Moreover, students don't even have control over their own work, for example during examinations, when learners are imposed to certain time and space limitations by the institution and academics (Mann, 2008).

Nowadays, due to time constraints, curricular control over time and large crowded classes, students are allowed neither to follow their own tempo in the learning process, nor to focus on the issues that are of their interest. By constant denying their own desires, students learn to control their impulses, repress their desires (for instance, a desire to ask questions) and

withdraw from the actual learning (Mann, 2008: 89). Hence, apathy and withdrawal are becoming natural and habitual adaptive strategies on behalf of contemporary students.

Another important issue here is the students' programmed activity and the assumption of the institution that all learners must do the same things (Mann, 2008). All participants of a program are required to do similar activities (for example, at seminars or lectures) and are consequently treated indifferently alike. Hence, students' actions are tightly scheduled and spaced and there is no room for variation or creativity at contemporary higher education institutions. In addition, Mann (2008: 85) argues that one of the main prerequisites for a successful completion of a program is students' subordination to the institutional practices. Today's learners are expected to internalize the norms of the staff and the discipline in order to be successful in their studies (*ibid.*).

2.3.5 The changing nature of the process of learning and assessment

Studies (Mann, 2008; Marton & Saljo, 1997; Scott, 1998) argue that the nature of learning at the contemporary university has changed. In their view, students enter higher education institutions not for the sake of acquiring knowledge, but for the sake of future career prospects and social status. Higher education is seen as an instrument towards greater economic and employment success (Scott, 1998); no longer is it a means of helping an individual in discovering and fulfilling their potentials (Mann, 2008).

Moreover, students' learning is strictly controlled and evaluated by other stakeholders in the higher education community (Castells, 2001). Such institutionalized practices as standardization, the linear organization of time and space, large classes, competition among peers, teacher authority, informal and formal evaluation, as well as, specific rules of conduct, reduce students' freedom and force learners to acquire adaptive strategies (Mann, 2001; 2008; Scott, 1998). In order to be seen as successful learners, students have to suppress their emotional responses and to act in particular ways according to particular conditions within the university.

Researchers argue that contemporary university students are under a constant pressure of being evaluated by others, both academically and in personal aspects (Mann, 2008: 89). One has to comply with conventional requirements of the "right" behavior and relate the way

they are evaluated to the evaluation of the others. This constant compliance and peer group membership are part of surviving strategies at the university (Mann, 2008).

Furthermore, some researchers assert that the whole learning process in contemporary education is built on the production of fear in students: fear of being seen as stupid, fear of making mistakes, of being wrong, of not pleasing the teacher (Mann, 2008). This fear, doubled by awareness of constant evaluation on behalf of others, leads to constant concern to get good grades and to be better than other students. Thus, Mann (2008) suggests that development of criticality, reflexivity and creativity, which were considered to be the main aims of higher education in the past time, are seen as unnecessary nowadays. What is more, they are not required by academics either. On the contrary, lecturers expect from their students repetition and reproduction of existing knowledge, rather than generation of the new knowledge (Mann, 2008).

This ritualized communication between the teacher and the students at contemporary universities seems to be the result of new curricular conditions and ministry's requirements that constrain the learning process and, amongst other things, lead to the worsened contact between students and lectures (Bourdieu, 1997, in Mann, 2008: 50). Furthermore, the relationship between these two major groups is constrained by existing narrow stereotypes at the university (Goffman, 1996, in Mann, 2008: 85). As such, academics feel superior and righteous while students tend to feel inferior and blameworthy. Consequently, both students and teachers conceive themselves as two contrasting groups seeing each other as "others" (Mann, 2008). Being "other" presupposes being distant, indifferent and speaking another language, which results in social distance between students and academics. However, this may vary from one department or a program to another.

In addition, the relationship between academics and students depend on assessment frames that rule at the university (Mann, 2008). Studies (Broadfoot, 2000; Mann, 2008) show that it is assessment that to a large extent contributes to students' alienating experience at the university. A close connection between power and assessment contribute to the fact that students focus on satisfying the requirements of the teacher rather than on the object of learning itself (Broadfoot, 2000). Thus, achieving good grades or marks translates into students' self-esteem, confidence and even employability. And the difference in the outcomes of assessment contributes to students' alienation from their fellow students and social exclusion (Mann, 2008).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the results of the work and conclusions of researchers who advocate two different theoretical perspectives in understanding students' subjective experiences on campus: the psychological approach, which focuses on the individual mental peculiarities of the student and their share in the negative reactions to the university life, and the theoretical approach, based on the concept of power, which postulates that students' possible engagement and alienation at the university depends much on the workings of power operating at every higher education institution.

The analysis of the existing literature on both theoretical perspectives, mentioned above, shows that today much attention is given to the relevance and importance of learners' alienating experience in the policy experimentation at the university. A shared view among researchers is that higher education institutions are in charge of students' mental health of campus and are, thus, obliged to and, in fact, able to launch certain measures necessary for learners' successful participation in the academic process at the university.

The most accepted by higher education researchers definition of stress by Lazarus and Folkman emphasizes the external demand which the individual feels unable to cope with; therefore, it is the persons' own perception of the situation that courses stress. In addition, our own personality traits play a big role in how we handle stress. In the university framework this means that changing students' attitude to stressful situations, they encounter during everyday educational process, is likely to diminish, if not eliminate, harmful influence of stress on their psyche. In other words, higher education institutions have the opportunity to take the responsibility for assisting their students on maintaining mental health.

The necessity of facilitating students' psychological wellness is proved by recent publications which point out that today's learners are much more concerned their academic performance than in previous years. Nowadays, due to the marketisation of the society, transition to a knowledge-based economy, increased need in knowledgeable specialists in advanced spheres of economy and massification of higher education, the university has been exposed to a considerable change in its economic and social functions. Researchers argue that these changes have consequently influenced the process of learning at the university resulting in a strict institutionalization of time, space and activity of the students which is depriving the learner of control on their process of studying. In addition, the older goal of

higher education – establishing a successful critical community of learners who are able to generate new knowledge – has within the last decades transformed into another one, namely a wish to educate as many school leavers as possible who are capable to reproduce already existing knowledge.

In addition, researchers stress that one shouldn't ignore power implicated within students' experience of higher education. The powerful implicit effect of the university, with its developed network of power relations, result in the increased risk for college students to develop not only the feeling of alienation and frustration with the university life, but also serious psychological disorders. Often, internal psychic health of the student and their external social position are at stake for the individual undertaking higher education. This is demonstrated by many national surveys that have identified the growing numbers of students at risk of suicidal attempts and severe depressions.

College counseling centres may represent one of the ways to help students adjust to college environment and college experience. At the same time, recent studies argue that the focus of their activities may need to be more on preventative measures rather than on mentoring students who have already been exposed to psychological problems. Thus, it has to be stressed that today there is a sharp need in expanding the key functions and roles of traditional counseling centres for students. One of the researchers' recommendations in this context is to employ some preventative measures on university campus, although this might not always be feasible in reality. Presumably, these measures would require considerable resources in time, energy and financial support on behalf of higher education institutions. Employing, however, at least a few of them would be of great benefit both for students and institutions themselves. By this researchers mean that good mental health services and necessary measures would enable institutions retain students, thus, tuition money, and help them meet their academic goals.

To sum it up, the two theoretical perspectives, provided in this chapter, will serve as a theoretical grounding for the empirical part of this study, which will follow in Chapter 5 (Discussions and conclusions), where the findings of the fieldwork in Russia will be discussed in the light of some of the postulates and findings of both approaches.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

Conducting credible social research requires a lot from the researcher: discipline, knowledge, practice, creativity and hard work (Patton, 1990: 11). Amongst other things, the right choice of essential methodological aspects such as research strategy, sampling, methods of data collection, validity and reliability considerations, etc., are of importance for generating reliable findings (Bryman, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These are meant to help the researcher to avoid or minimize biases that are inherent to empirical research.

This chapter sheds light on the methodological aspects that were applied while carrying out the research on academic stress among university students. Such issues as data management and data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, validity and reliability were considered relevant for addressing the research questions of the study. Bigger emphasis in the chapter will be given to justifying the appropriateness of qualitative approach to the objectives of this study, selection of the research respondents, key principles of data collection procedures, data collection methods (in-depth interviews, focus groups, document analysis) and instrumentation of the study both in Norway and Russia.

3.2 Research strategy and design

Qualitative approach was chosen to become the dominant strategy for conducting social research on the issue of academic stress among students and student support structures. Generally speaking, qualitative method of inquiry is characterized by depth, openness and detail (Patton, 1990: 13) and is concerned with the generation of the theory, rather than testing of it, thus employing the inductive scientific method (Bryman, 2004). The main perspective is that qualitative approach is aimed at understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena within their social surroundings and natural settings (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). This presupposes close contact between the qualitative researcher and the research participants which results in the large volume of rich data, unique case orientation and holistic perspective of a phenomenon under study (Ritchie et al., 2003: 3).

Many authors (Bryman, 2004; Patton, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2003) emphasize the following key aspects of qualitative approach: explanation and understanding of social phenomena by learning about people's experiences and perspectives, design flexibility in case the research situations change, purposeful sampling, limited amount of quantification of the data, presentation of multiple perspectives of data gathered. Given these key characteristics, qualitative approach is identified with such methods of data collection as observational methods, in-depth interviewing, group discussions, document and text analysis, biographical methods such as life histories and narratives (Bryman, 2004; Patton, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2003). Often social researchers rely on combination of two-three of these while conducting their empirical work.

As for the research design, the original idea for this study was to employ comparative cross-cultural design that would allow looking at the case of the University of Oslo and Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk in contrast. This would be helpful for deeper insight into the issue of academic stress in university students in both countries as, according to Bryman (2004), comparing social phenomena in two meaningfully contrasting settings promotes better understanding of the research problem. However, given the time limitations and the volume of the study, it would be difficult to use more or less identical methods of data collection and research instruments both in Norway and Russia, which is a necessary precondition for comparative design.

Thus, it was decided that a case study design focusing on the intensive analysis of the case of the university in Russia would be more appropriate for this kind of study. However, this is rather a multiple-case study than a single-case one due to the fact that the University of Oslo serves as an example of a possible campus structure of student counseling services. In fact, the aim of the study is to trace the possibility and need for introducing a similar structure at Pomor State University in Russia. This can be, however, seen as one of the traits of the comparative research design which seeks greater awareness of social reality in different national contexts through explaining similarities and differences in issues studied (Bryman, 2004: 34).

It is important to be aware of the fact that a case study research, as such, is considered to be too small for confident generalizations as it focuses on the intensive analysis of a single community/school/organization, associating a study with a location (Patton, 1990). According to Bryman (2004) and Patton (1990), it is the case itself that is of a particular interest in the researcher's pursuit to generate an intensive, detailed examination of the

setting and to provide a suitable context for the research questions and the study's purpose. Furthermore, the richness of the context (which is the major part of the case study) presupposes that the study can not rely on a single data collection method but will likely need to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1993). The data collection procedures and methods, used for this study will be presented later in this chapter after the discussion of study setting and timing of the research.

3.3 Study settings and timing of the research

The main bulk of the research for this study took place in the Russian Federation, the largest country in the world with total of 17,075,400 square kilometres inhabited by 142 millions of population (Wikipedia, 2009). Russia is a Federal semi-presidential republic which comprises 83 federal subjects consisting of 46 regions, 21 republics, 9 territories, 4 autonomous districts, one Jewish Autonomous Oblast (territory) and two federal cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg) that function as separate regions. Due to rising oil prices, increased foreign investment, higher domestic consumption and greater political stability, Russia have experienced economic growth the last decades having become one of the world's influential and fastest growing major economies (Wikipedia, 2009).

Arkhangelsk oblast, where the fieldwork took place, is the most northern federal subject of Russia situating in the North-western part of the Russian Federation comprising the territory of 587,400 square kilometres and 1,336,539 of population (according to the official website of Arkhangelsk City Administration, 2009). The city of Arkhangelsk is the administrative centre of the region and remains a major seaport, timber and fishing centre. Apart from a number of profit-making higher education institutions, the city houses three main state universities - Pomor State University, Arkhangelsk State Technical University and Northern State Medical University. These implement accredited training of specialists in pedagogical profession, technology and medical science estimating the total number of college students as 31,437 (according to the official website of Arkhangelsk City Administration, 2009).

Pomor State University named after M. V. Lomonosov, which was chosen as a case for the fieldwork of this study, is one of the biggest classical universities in the European North of Russia. Founded in 1932 with only four departments opened, the university has grown to a competitive research-oriented university, innovative educational and scientific institution

highly acknowledged in Russia and abroad (according to the official website of Pomor State University, 2009). Nowadays, Pomor State University comprises two institutes, 21 faculties, 66 departments with over 57 specialties, 27 scientific centres and laboratories with 13 campuses in Arkhangelsk, Severodvinsk and Koryazhma¹. The total of over 14.000 students, 1500 academic staff including Doctors of Sciences, PhDs and Professors are contributing to the dynamic development of the university, not only within domestic but international educational area as well. Over the last 5 years, the university can boast of the leading position among the higher education institutions in the European North of Russia.

The university implements accredited training of specialists in such spheres of knowledge as natural sciences, humanities and social sciences, education and pedagogy, economics, physical and mathematical sciences, computer engineering and management, information science, technology of food products and consumer goods. Beside undergraduate and graduate degrees, Pomor State University offers a wide choice of life-long learning programs for adult population who have already achieved an undergraduate degree. Being one of the leading research universities of the Arkhangelsk region Pomor State University has been clearly maximising its scientific potential during the last two decades. The university implements research in 19 branches of science which relate to priority areas for the development of science, technologies and engineering in the region, has a number of ongoing large science and innovation projects, often wins federal grants and grants of the President of the Russian Federation for its scientists (according to the official website of Pomor State University, 2009).

In 1993, as a result of the introduction of the core principles of Bologna process in Russia, Pomor State University adopted Bachelor and Master Programs as a supplement to the system of 5-6 year specialist degree. Today, eight bachelor and three master programs are available for the students at the university, whereas twenty-nine offer a specialist diploma upon graduation. In addition, in 2006 three university faculties have introduced the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in order to contribute to the recognition of Russian students' qualifications abroad.

Moreover, during the last decades Pomor State University has given a greater emphasis to the international cooperation and exchange. This is proved by the university's participation in numerous international conferences, exhibitions, students' internships and academics'

¹ Severodvinsk and Koryazhma are two smaller towns near Arkhangelsk where Pomor State University houses its affiliates.

exchanges at foreign universities, a number of double diploma programs with the partnership of several universities in Finland, Norway and Poland. All in all, Pomor State University can boast of 45 cooperation agreements with foreign universities and research centres in 12 countries of Europe, America and Asia. Beside international contacts, the university is also active in facilitating national cooperation between many Russian universities and research centres (according to the information found at the official website of Pomor State University, 2009).

The collection of data at Pomor State University started in the beginning of February 2008, the second week of the spring semester at Russian higher education institutions, the time when university students are back from winter holidays which usually start in the end of January and last till the second week of February. My assumption is that this could have its effect on collected data on students' perception of the levels of academic stress due to the fact that the examination session was over² and the students were more relaxed at the start of the new semester. Presumably, the findings could be different if the fieldwork took place in the middle of the semester or right before the examination session in January. As for the fieldwork in Norway, it was conducted prior to the one in Russia, that is, in January 2008. The aim was to get sufficient information about the arrangement and activities of the student support structures at the University of Oslo in order to appeal to it during the interviews with the administration and students at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk.

3.4 Research respondents

Selection of populations is crucial for conducting a qualitative study (Patton, 1990). Only those respondents who are able to provide the most relevant, comprehensive and rich information should be identified for the research by virtue of their relationship with the research questions (Lewis, 2003: 78). Furthermore, according to Hoyle et al., (2002), a good sampling doesn't only play a critical role when the conclusions are generalized beyond the samples that have been studied, but it is also important for validity, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

² The examination session at Russian universities usually starts on the 10-12th of January and lasts till the 22-25th. After this students have one week winter holidays and are back at the university at the beginning of February.

Purposive sampling (Hoyle et al., 2002; Patton, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2003) was chosen as an appropriate strategy for conducting this research. This method of nonprobability sampling allows picking up representatives that are considered to be typical of the population the researcher is interested in. Usually researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent the population (Berg, 1998).

In order to answer the research questions of this study three categories of respondents were chosen at Pomor State University: students, managers of the departments, members of the university and faculty administration. A total of 21 students, 1 policy maker, 2 members of the faculty administration and 2 policy implementers (managers of the departments) contributed to the findings. The students were engaged in focus group discussions while the other respondents were interviewed. Table 3.1 below provides with an overview of all the participants of the investigation.

Table 3.1 Respondents of the study

Category		Gender	Grand total	Total
Policy maker (university administration)	Pro-rector in extracurricular work	Female	1	1
Faculty members (faculty administration)	Dean of the faculty of psychology	Female	1	2
	Dean of the faculty of the foreign languages	Female	1	
Policy implementers	Manager of the University Psychological Service	Female	1	2
	Manager of the Department of extracurricular work	Female	1	
Students	1-year students	Female	8	21
	5-year students	Female	13	

The following paragraphs of this chapter give a more detailed description of the criteria used for the selection of research respondents for this study.

3.4.1 Selection of the students

The following selection criteria were applied in order to select the research participants for this study:

- Students undertaking a full undergraduate degree at the faculty of foreign languages;
- Full-time students;
- 1-year students, aged from 17 to 18 or 5-year students, aged from 21 to 23.

All students were studying at the faculty of foreign languages when the fieldwork took place. This specific faculty was chosen due to my personal connection to it via studying and working experience at Pomor State University. Knowing most of the staff and members of the administration of the faculty, as well as, some students, made the conducting of the fieldwork for this thesis easier concerning getting into contact with information-rich participants and practical arrangements.

The last criteria for choosing the respondents among students, mentioned above, was set due to the assumption that 1-year students would provide with rich data about their experience at starting the university life and further adaptation to it, while 5-year students would be information-rich respondents in terms of overall university experience due to a longer period of studying on campus.

It should be mentioned that all respondents were female which mirrors the situation with gender distribution at the faculty of foreign languages. The specification of the specialization (foreign languages) has always affected the number of male school-leavers who would seek attendance at the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University. Thus, the gender was not used as a criterion for this study; the sample consequently consists of only female students.

3.4.2 Selection of the members of the university administration, faculty administration and policy implementors

Only one respondent among the university administration was selected before my coming to the site of the fieldwork, namely, the dean of the faculty of foreign languages, due to the fact that this faculty was the target setting of the study. Other informants were included in the sample by so-called snowball sampling (Bryman, 2004; Hoyle et al., 2002; Patton, 1990). This method allows identifying valuable to the research problem respondents by making initial contact with other people at place (Bryman, 2004). Thus, by getting information from useful contacts a small initial sample becomes large enough to meet the requirements of the research design and data analysis (Hoyle et al., 2002).

In this study, snowball sampling helped identifying several unexpected research respondents which provided with valuable research data: the manager of the Department of extracurricular work, the manager of the University Psychological Service and the Dean of the faculty of psychology. The first step in order to identify possible informants for the study was to talk to the secretary of the Rector of Pomor State University who directed me to the pro-rector in extracurricular work. The interview with the pro-rector in extracurricular work helped identifying such information-rich informants as the manager of the Department of extracurricular work and the Dean of the faculty of psychology. The last one, in her turn, directed me to the manager of the Psychological Service established on campus.

3.5 Data collection procedures and methods

3.5.1 Instrumentation

According to the research questions, as well as, the research design and the purpose of the study, different methods of data collection were used at the two empirical sites of the study: document analysis – at the University of Oslo, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document analysis – at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk. Prior to coming to the site of the fieldwork in Russia a research proposal and the guides for interviews and focused group discussions were developed and approved by the supervisors.

When at Pomor State University, in order to obtain approval for conducting focus groups with students, I contacted the dean of the faculty of foreign languages and provided her with

information about the research itself, the problem statement and objectives of the study. Furthermore, I received the dean's permission to use some of the faculty's technical devices (in particular, a digital recorder) and auditoriums for conducting focus groups with students.

It should be mentioned that focus group discussions were carried out before questioning the respondents at the university administration in order to use the students' arguments on the research topic while interviewing the university authorities. Before each interview with both students and members of the administration, I presented to them a rationale for the research which consisted of a brief overview of the motives of the study, research questions and problem statement.

After conducting each interview or focus group session I wrote down an individual interview report in the form of field notes stating the timing of the interviews, settings, respondents' behavior and its possible changing along the length of the session, my personal observations of the participants and preliminary assessment of the findings. All interviews were recorded and subsequently entered into the computer (two different computers in order to secure the storage of the data) and afterwards transcribed verbatim in Russian. While reading the transcripts later, it was decided which parts of the interviews were of a particular value to the study and those were subsequently translated into English.

3.5.2 Pilot testing

A pilot study was considered of importance for this study, mostly due to the lack of my personal experience in making questions for interviews and conducting a social research in general. Researchers (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003; Bryman, 2004; Hoyle et al., 2002) argue that pilot testing is a critical part of a research that helps to ensure that the interview questions are easy to understand and that they operate well. Moreover, the fact that individuals for pilot study are taken from the same population as the eventual participants, can be helpful in revision of the research objectives before conducting the actual interviews (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003).

For this study, a group of 5-year students consisting of six students participated in piloting (initially, eight students were invited for the focus group discussion, two did not show up due to personal reasons). It should be pointed out that I was well acquainted with this group due to the 3-year teaching experience prior to pursuing my Master degree in Norway. In my

opinion, my good relationship with the students would allow them minimizing possible constraints while both discussing their university experience and giving suggestions about the interview questions. To sum it up, the pilot study was aimed at achieving the following purposes:

- Providing the researcher with some experience in carrying out focus groups with students;
- Examining the practical arrangements for conducting focus groups with students: testing the tape recorder and its placing, tables/chairs arrangement, the amount of time the focus group interviewing would require;
- Improving the interview guide: identifying confusing questions and questions which possibly would make respondents feel uncomfortable.

Finally, it was decided to use the results from this initial pilot focus group discussion in the main bulk of the empirical findings for this study due to several reasons. Firstly, there were no big revisions made in the interview guide after conducting the pilot study. Secondly, the richness of data resulting from it, contributed to a great extent to understanding the research problem of the study. Thus, the pilot sampling was used as an ordinary one.

3.5.3 In-depth interviewing

In-depth interviewing, which combine both structure and flexibility, is the most common qualitative data collection method frequently used by social researchers (Legard et al., 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). This method of data collection explores issues in depth and detail seeking to understand complex processes such as, for example, motivations, decisions, outcomes (Lewis, 2003: 27). Amongst other things, due to its interactive nature, in-depth interview is more like a conversation which allows getting a large amount of rich data by capturing the deep meaning of experience in the participants' words (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and by extensive use of follow-up questions (Legard et al., 2003). Therefore, in-depth interviews have no predetermined response categories allowing the researcher respect the way an interviewee frames their perspectives on the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1999: 19).

Out of three different types of in-depth interviews identified by Patton (1990) – the *informal conversational interview*, the *general interview guide* and the *standardized open-ended interview* – the general interview guide approach was chosen to conduct interviews for this study. This kind of questioning implies the use of the interview guide which serves as a checklist during questioning to make sure that all relevant topics are covered (Patton, 1990). This is of importance if the researcher seeks to elicit basically the same information from different research respondents. Sequencing of the questions is, however, not of the researcher's interest, neither is the particular wording of questions (*ibid.*).

Moreover, it is important for the qualitative interviewing that the researcher tries to minimize the chance of gathering data with predetermined responses (Patton, 1990). This can be achieved by extensive use of open-ended questions that do not presuppose any dimensions for a respondent's answer (Legard et al., 2003). Furthermore, it is especially crucial to avoid any predetermined dimensions when questioning about interviewees' thoughts, feelings and experiences (Patton, 1990), which is exactly the focus of this study. Thus, it was critical to avoid dichotomous response questions ("yes" or "no" questions) (Patton, 1990) as much as possible while designing the interview guides for this study.

As mentioned earlier, all interview guides for this study were designed and approved by the supervisors prior to my departure for the fieldwork in Russia. The guide for the interviews with the administration (*see Appendix A*) covered five main areas of interest (that will be presented in the chapter on the results from the fieldwork) and consisted of ten main questions. After identifying new respondents due to snowballing sampling, some questions were added to the guide in order to cover the new aspects of the study (the ones, for example, connected to the existence of the psychological service on campus at Pomor State University).

The face-to-face interviews at Pomor State University were conducted at the interviewees' offices on campus on appointment basis and varied from 55 minutes to 2 hours 30 minutes. All in all, five interviews were carried out, maximum one interview a day. In spite of the fact that all of them were recorded on tape, additional notes were taken during the questioning sessions. This happened to serve as a solid back up for recording when during one of the interviews with a faculty member the battery in the recorder went dead and the recording stopped without my noticing this. It turned out that 40 minutes of the interview were lost. Fortunately, the interview was a long one (2 hours 30 minutes) and the respondent kept repeating what she had already mentioned during the whole session. In addition, the

interviewee was contacted the day after the questioning took place for clarification of the points I wasn't sure about after the partial loss of the recording. Therefore, it was not as challenging to reconstruct the essential data from this interview as I had expected.

3.5.4 Focused group discussion

Focused group discussion (Bloor et al., 2001; Finch & Lewis, 2003; Hoyle et al., 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990) is another widely used method of qualitative research approach which was used for interviewing the students of the faculty of foreign languages. This method of data collection represents in-depth interviewing with several participants who are encouraged to dwell upon the topic of interest to the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). There is, however, an important difference between in-depth interviews and focus groups, namely, the data generated: a focus group discussion allows to get valuable additional material due to the fact that respondents (usually from five to ten people) reflect upon each others' views and, thus, facilitate further discussions and refine individual responses (Finch & Lewis, 2003: 31). Therefore, it is the interaction between a relatively homogeneous group of participants that generates the data (*ibid.*).

Still, a focus group is neither a discussion, nor a problem-solving session, but an interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The researcher acts as the facilitator of the group interaction asking questions, encouraging expression of different opinions and supporting environment (*ibid.*). The disadvantage of this method of data collection is however its spontaneity and a more naturalistic setting than that of in-depth interview. This often leads to less control on behalf of the researcher resulting in lost time and sometimes discussions of irrelevant issues (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In addition, the groups can be hard to assemble and special arrangements are to be made in order to carry out this kind of interviewing. Due to these disadvantages, focus groups require good preparation from the researcher and, nonetheless, skills in order to be able to manage a conversation while getting good quality data (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

The focus group discussions, conducted with the students at Pomor State University, consisted of two groups of 5-year students (six persons - for a pilot study and seven for an ordinary sample) and one group of 1-year students (eight persons). These groups of students were chosen out of all 1-year and 5-year groups studying at the faculty (excluding the pilot group of 5-year students which was chosen deliberately). The first step was to study the

timetable of all 1-year and 5-year groups at the faculty of foreign languages and decide which of these could be approached in correlation with my personal schedule. After identifying two groups, I contacted their main teachers³ and scheduled particular days when I could come and meet the students. During these seminar sessions the students were presented with the purpose of my research and asked about their possible participation in focus group discussions.

Thus, three focus groups with 21 participants were carried out for this study. Each of the discussions lasted from 1 hour 10 minutes to 2 hours and was held on the university campus. A group discussion guide comprising eleven open-ended questions in the participants' native language (see the translated into English discussion guide in Appendix A) was used while conducting the focus groups. The discussions were audio taped in addition to my taking written notes.

When it comes to the content of the focus group discussions, one could easily see that the students of the faculty of foreign languages were in need to talk about the issue of mental health and psychological environment at the faculty. Their interest in this issue contributed to the enthusiastic discussions among the interviewed students and sharing of their past experiences. From time to time it was challenging to keep the respondents within the issues relevant for the research topic and prevent them from eliciting memories from the past exam experiences and discussing the teachers' subjectivity.

On the other hand, the heated discussions among students showed the high level of their anxiety concerning the issue of academic stress and appreciation that somebody was interested in their psychological experiences on campus. In this context, there was almost no need to encourage the students to express their opinions on the research topic due to their eagerness to contribute to the discussion. As such, the students' engagement allowed gathering valuable for the research questions data that are presented in Chapter 4 (Presentation of the findings).

³ At the faculty of foreign languages each group of students have one main teacher, in the main language studied, during the whole studying year. This teacher usually acts as a mentor for their group and has the main responsibility for the students.

3.5.5 Document analysis

Document analysis is considered to be a good supplement for other qualitative methods of data collection which have their own limitations (Bryman, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). Reviewing documentary sources such as government papers, procedural documents, formal letters, organizational records, financial accounts, as well as, personal diaries, letters and photographs, is of value to the researcher as they can help generation additional understanding and deeper meanings when events can not be investigated by other methods of inquiry (Ritchie, 2003). Moreover, they are particularly useful where the history of events or experiences are of relevance to the findings (*ibid.*), as is the case with this study which is also aiming at tracing the history of psychological services at the universities in Norway and Russia. Furthermore, gathering and analyzing documents is of importance and relevance in order to develop understanding of the setting of the study or a group studied (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

For this study, the following documentary sources were used:

- at the University of Oslo: annual reports from the previous years issued by student support structures on campus: Student Counseling, the psychiatric/psychological section and the Buddy system, as well as, different advertising brochures and leaflets published by them;
- at Pomor State University: organizational records on the functioning of the psychological service on campus, a project report on introducing a University center of Psychological support on campus, published advertising materials about the work of the psychological service, activity calendars of the department of extracurricular work, selected articles from the university's newspaper Lomonosovets written by the practitioners of the university's psychological service, booklets To the Freshman published in 2005 and 2007.

These documentary sources were selected according to their relevance and link to the research questions developed in the conceptual framework for this study. Their selection and analysis served multiple aims: delineating the functions and history of establishing support structures on campuses both at the Norwegian and Russian universities, tracing extracurricular activities for freshmen, estimating the scope of preventative measures for facilitating students' mental wellness in both countries.

3.6 Data management and data analysis procedures

Data analysis represents a complex process which allows the researcher to bring order, structure and interpret the massive “raw” qualitative material gathered (Hoyle et al., 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990; Spencer et al., 2003). Consistent arranging of the data and exploring associations that exist in it helps the researcher to detect patterns or possible problems in the findings and to see if the data are consistent with the theory (Hoyle et al., 2002). This is a very time-consuming, non-linear process that typically consists of six stages (Marshall & Rossman, 1999): 1) organizing the data; 2) generating categories, themes and patterns; 3) coding the data; 4) testing the emergent understanding; 5) searching for alternative explanations; 6) writing the report. Not all of these phases are used by all researchers, though, as there are no clearly agreed rules or procedures for analyzing qualitative data (Spencer et al., 2003).

This study makes use of content analysis as the analytical process which helps identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Patton, 1990: 31). It should be mentioned that content analysis is particularly useful while analyzing the contents of interviews as it involves the identification of key themes, concepts or categories that simplifies the process of reducing and organizing the data (Spencer et al., 2003).

Thus, the data analysis for this study started with a careful reading of the transcripts with data from the recorded interviews. This was followed by the identification of the salient categories into which the rich data was organized, and therefore reduced. The next step consisted of challenging the understanding of the gathered information by evaluating the data for their usefulness and centrality, as not all the data could be used in the presenting the results of the study. Finally, after having searched for plausible explanations for the findings and the links between them, I wrote a report where these alternative explanations were described according to the theoretical framework used for this study. This report constitutes Chapter 5 of this study, Discussions and conclusions.

3.7 Researcher's preconceptions

Studies argue that social research always involve an element of the unknown if it is not designed to simply duplicate the previous findings (Pole and Lampard, 2002, in Lewis,

2003: 75). A key strength of a qualitative research in particular is that it can explore unanticipated issues as they emerge (Lewis, 2003). Thus, it is a continuing process which requires constant review of decisions and approaches on behalf of the researcher (*ibid.*).

Before going to the site of the fieldwork in Russia, my main assumption was that there were no student support structures on campus of Pomor State University, in particular, no psychological service for students. This was the crucial supposition that formed the whole idea of this study, namely, to investigate the reasons of neglecting the important issue of students' stress at the Russian universities and explore the possibility of introducing there similar support structures as those at the University of Oslo. After 5 years of studying and 3 years of work experience as a teacher at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, I was sure that my preconception about a complete neglect of students' psychological health there would be proved on coming to the university for conducting the fieldwork. Instead, I found out that things had changed there during the last 2 years that I was away.

Thus, due to the unexpected findings of the fieldwork the research questions and the purpose of the study needed to be reviewed and reflected upon from a new angle. Nevertheless, I managed to retain the idea of introducing the example of structure arrangement of the Norwegian support system for students to the administration and students at the Russian university, besides dwelling upon some additional issues.

My other preconception because of the long personal presence at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk was that students of the faculty of foreign languages were subjected to constant academic stress and did not get sufficient help on behalf of the administration or faculty. As opposed to the first supposition mentioned above, this assumption was verified by the data generated during focus group interviews with the students.

3.8 Validity and reliability

The issues of validity and reliability are considered to be central concepts for qualitative research (Bryman, 2004; Kvale, 1989; Patton, 1990; Silverman, 1993). They secure the correspondence of the social research findings to the social world reality they are describing (Silverman, 1993). Furthermore, validity, defined as the extent to which a measure is devised to measure a concept of researcher's interest (Bryman, 2004: 23), requires reliability which

refers to the consistency of that measure (*ibid.*). Researchers' preoccupation with these two concepts helps maintaining the reliability of generated data and provides reliable descriptions of particular aspects of the social world.

In this study validity was maintained by several aspects. First of all, the variety of methodological procedures and sources was secured by triangulation of data collection methods (interviews, focus groups, document analysis) and the choice of different categories of informants at the university (students, policy makers, members of the faculty administration, policy implementers). Cross-checking of information and conclusions, together with purposive sampling, were also used in the study in order to increase validity and reliability of the findings.

In addition, in order to revise the interview guide and ensure that the interview questions operate well, an initial pilot study with a focus group interview with relevant respondents was administered. Moreover, after having transcribed the recorded interviews, parts of the transcripts were sent to the interview participants so that they could check the accuracy of my interpretations and conclusions. Direct quotations (verbatim) were also used in the report on the results of the study as one of the strategies of promoting qualitative research validity.

Amongst other things, the use of multiple theories and perspectives to help interpret the data and their mutual compliance (relevance of the theoretical conceptions to the research questions and data collected) are considered important for the trustworthiness of the study. Moreover, discussions with peers who were familiar with my research and self-reflection on my potential biases and predispositions, that could possibly affect the interpretation of the findings, were also of importance and relevance for the study.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Certain ethical issues should be given particular thought by the researcher while conducting a social study (Cozby, 2007; Lewis, 2003). In this aspect, the main aim of the social research is to maximize benefits from the study and to minimize potential harmful effects on the participants (Cozby, 2007).

Of great importance to this study are the issues of anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents which were achieved by concealing the names of the interviewees. In addition to

obtaining oral consent from the respondents, they were assured in the anonymity of the research, as well as, in the fact that I would be the only person to listen the tape recordings from the interview sessions. All data generated were kept in a secure place, including audio taped data kept in the computer in a separate folder with access restrictions. Transcripts and tapes were not labeled in any way that could compromise anonymity. In addition, I assured the research participants that the recordings would be deleted from the computer and the recorder right after the study is finished.

3.10 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of various methodological aspects that are relevant for the present study, as well as, a brief overview of the study settings and timing of the research. The qualitative research method was chosen as a main strategy of carrying out the research due to its preoccupation with detailed rich explanation and understanding of social phenomena by learning about people's experiences and perspectives. Conducting qualitative research was supported by purposeful and snowball sampling methods of selection of respondents which contributed to gathering relevant, comprehensive and rich information.

The data collection methods were also in accordance with the chosen research strategy and were differentiated in application: document analysis was used both at Pomor State University in Russia and at the University of Oslo in Norway while semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out only at the Russian university. All in all, five interviews with the university officials and three focus groups with the students (one of them for piloting purposes) were successfully carried out, recorded and transcribed. After that, the data was arranged and analyzed with the help of content analysis procedure which involved the identification of key themes, concepts or categories and, thus, simplified the process of reducing and organizing the data.

It should be also mentioned that such important methodological concepts as validity and reliability, together with ethical considerations, were also in the focus while conducting this study. Validity and reliability were maintained by triangulation of data collection methods, participants and theories used, purposeful sampling procedure, as well as, cross-checking of information and conclusions with the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the

research respondents were achieved by concealing their actual names and secure storage of the tape-recordings and transcripts.

All the described methodological procedures allowed gathering valid and reliable data during the fieldwork that provided the researcher with the excessive amount of information. This was reduced according to the purpose of answering the research questions and summarized in the next chapter on the results of the fieldwork.

4 Presentation of the findings

4.1 Introduction

The following chapter will explore the issue of academic stress among students at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk and the student support structures established on campus of the Russian university and the University of Oslo. Thus, the findings are presented in two sections according to the country where the fieldwork took place. Stronger emphasis will be, however, given to the results of the fieldwork at the Russian university.

Consequently, the first part of this chapter starts with the presentation of the findings from Pomor State University in pursuit of answering the first three research questions:

1. How do the students of the faculty of foreign languages perceive the need for Russian students to have a psychological service on campus? What kind of psychological help do they need?
2. What is the role of the university in students' acquiring psychological problems on campus? How can students' mental health be facilitated by the university?
3. How is the issue of students' academic stress addressed at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk? What measures and support structures are introduced by the administration of the university in order to reduce academic stress in students?

The findings from the Russian university are built up on the focus groups with the students of the faculty of foreign languages and interviews with other stakeholders at the university – members of the university and faculty administration and managers of the support structures established on campus. Based on the findings of these interviews, such issues as perceived stress among university students, the problem of adaptation to the university life, the need for psychological help and psychological counseling on campus will be discussed in the first part of this chapter.

Later, I will present the findings that shed light on the possibility of introducing at Pomor State University support structures similar to those at the University of Oslo. In order to answer this research question, it is necessary to give an overview of the whole system of support organizations at the Norwegian university. Consequently, the second part of this chapter will dwell on Student counseling, the Psychiatric/psychological Section and the Buddy system which are successfully functioning at the University of Oslo. The general

structure, brief history and the main aspects of the functioning of all the three structures will presumably shed light on the ability of Pomor State University to create the comprehensive psychological service in order to address mental health problems among students. Thus, the chapter will end with the discussions of the Russian respondents on the possibility to introduce the Norwegian student structure at the Russian university.

It is, however, necessary to point out that due to the large volume of the data generated during the interviews and focus discussions, this chapter will present only those findings that are relevant for answering the above mentioned research questions of the study.

4.2 The case of Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk

4.2.1 Perceived levels of academic stress in students

All students who took part in the focus groups (both the 1-year students and the ones who were going to graduate from the university) found studying at the faculty of foreign languages to be stressful and difficult. In general, according to the students, they had been exposed to high levels of stress during the whole studying period at the university. Answering the question about which years at the university were the most stressful ones, the 5-year students pointed out that the 1st one, due to the start of the university life, and the 5th year, due to the graduation exams. Thus, the 5-year students seemed to be happy to leave the university in a couple of months as, according to them, their anxiety had not decreased by the end of the five-year study period at the faculty.

Furthermore, most of the students confessed that they had expected a different study experience before they entered the university, and that they had in a way become disappointed with the chosen faculty. This was mostly due to the large volume of material to be studied and a constant pressure of maintaining good grades. A shared feeling among the students was that they did not have time to do anything else in life except their homework. An ordinary day of the student of the faculty of foreign languages was as follows:

I came back home, ate, did my homework, slept for three hours, got up and did my homework again till 1-2 a.m. And however hard I studied, I didn't manage to do all my homework. After a 4-5 hours' sleep I did the rest of my homework before going to the university at 8 a.m. This repeated all over again after coming back from the

lectures at 5 p.m. Such a monotonous, dull life! (1-year student, focus group, February 2008)

Many students recognised their life pattern in this description and confessed that, while studying, they had no time for such necessary things as sufficient sleep, personal life, hobbies, meetings with friends and communicating with the family. Naturally, this resulted in a decreased interest in studies and phlegmatic attitude to the academic life in general.

One of the most common sources of students' anxiety while studying at the faculty of foreign languages was exam stress and fear of not being able to pass. The interviewed students suggested that there are not as many exams at higher education institutions abroad as there are at Russian universities. They complained of having to take 4-5 exams within the period of two weeks each semester, hence, having approximately three days for preparing for every examination or a test.

In this context, the respondents would often study for the exams till 4-5 a.m. having 2-3 hours sleep during a period of 2 weeks. Furthermore, the respondents asserted that no matter how hard they studied or how much knowledge on a subject they had, the final grade would depend on the teacher's mood on the examination day⁴. Often, the staff wouldn't give them the grade they deserved, in their view. The interviews with the students showed that unfair assessment due to the teacher's personal empathy for some of the students and a strong feeling of dislike for the others had a strong psychological effect on some of the students:

She (the teacher) gave me B instead of A and she wouldn't even let me finish the answer. I cried the whole way back home (1-year student, focus group, February 2008).

What's the point of getting ready for an exam?! If I learn everything by heart or if I don't, anyway she (the teacher) will give me a D! I have lost the whole interest in studying (5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

As reported by the dean of the faculty of foreign languages, there are no defined criteria for students' assessment at oral exams. That's why the final grade for a subject depends to a great extent on the teacher's personal attitude to the students. According to the dean, there

⁴ A common practice in Russian higher education institutions is an oral exam assessed by one member of the faculty who is the main teacher of the course, too.

are, unfortunately, very few members of the university staff who comply with fair assessment at oral examinations.

It should be also mentioned that unfair assessment at Russian higher education institutions is common not only during examination sessions, but also during the usual course of study during a semester. The participants of this study claimed they had to adjust themselves to every teacher and his/her way of assessing and teaching the subject. If a student happened not to be liked by a teacher for any personal or academic reason, this would mean considerable difficulties for the student during the whole study, ranging from unfair grades to not being allowed to pass exam. Thus, one of the greatest fears of the students during the first couple of years at the faculty was the constant fear of dropping out from the university⁵. Unfortunately, this happens frequently at Russian higher education institutions.

In other words, the students, participating in the study, pointed out the strained relationship with academics as one of the main stressors in their university experience:

They ruined my life! (5-year student, focus group, February 2008)

It's the academics who are racking our psyche into pieces. Especially those teachers, the ones of the old school⁶. The whole studying process is ruined by the staff (5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

The 5-year students, whose citations are mentioned above, belonged to the group of exchange students who had an opportunity to study one semester at the University of Tromsø in Norway. Thus, they could see and reflect upon the differences between the quality of teaching and relationship between students and staff both in Russia and Norway. In this respect, the students noted that in Tromsø the teachers showed care about their students; they were even interested if the students were getting accustomed to the life in a new country and other personal issues. A wish to help and support the students both in personal and academic life was a natural thing among the Norwegian staff. Thus, the students claimed that while studying in Tromsø they experienced less stress connected to their communication with the academics and studies in general.

⁵ In Russia students can lose their right to study at a higher education institution because of delays in studies or failing an exam.

⁶ A commonly used expression about academics that started to teach during the Soviet Union period. By this expression people mean grumpy old ladies, extremely strict, having their own state of mind and difficult to deal with.

Conversely, at Pomor State University there was hardly anyone who would simply listen to their problems or tried to help them. The students reported that they felt that there was nobody interested in their difficulties during all the years of studying at the university in Arkhangelsk, and that they had to deal with their concerns on their own. The following words of the members of the staff, cited by the interviewed students, leave no doubt that the academic staff themselves were well aware of the challenges awaiting students at the faculty:

Get used to fact that there is no justice at this faculty (a 5-year student, citing her teacher, focus group, February 2008).

If you have graduated from the faculty of foreign languages, you can survive anything in life (a 5-year student, citing her teacher, focus group, February 2008).

The students claimed that it is common at the faculty that some academics would not let the students pass their exams. Dozens of bright students had had problems with these teachers within several years; some students did not even dare to come to the exam because of the fear for the teachers. And though the administration of the faculty was well aware of the reasons for students' dropping out and aware that the problem was with the teachers, not with the learners, nothing was done in order to help students. These teachers are still working at the faculty and contributing to the students' development of psychological disorders. Thus, the 5-year students, that were interviewed, were perplexed about the faculty administration's unwillingness to solve this kind of conflicts.

Indeed, the interview with the dean of the faculty of foreign languages confirmed that the administration was informed about the confrontations between some teachers and students. In the dean's view, the problem is in the changed category of students who have come to the university during the last years. Following the rector's order, the faculties started to enrol everybody who wanted to study at the university, also those who did not have a sufficient knowledge base and studying skills necessary for successful studying at a higher education institution. It is of interest that this opinion about the changed category of students was shared by all interviewed respondents at the administration level. According to the dean of the faculty of psychology,

...students are becoming more problematic to deal with, more infantile, lacking the initiative and studying skills. And they are all eager to study at the universities. Nowadays, university entrants are not able to make notes, to see the main point in the text, to make a plan of the text, don't have skills to compare things, classify,

summarize, learn by heart. They need help. Psychology can teach these skills (the dean of the faculty of psychology, interview, February 2008).

Furthermore, she alleged that some of the staff do not understand or do not want to understand this change in contemporary students and continue to use their old methods of teaching directed toward the brightest ones. The academics have not accustomed themselves to the new category of students, still having in mind that their main duty is to govern the process of study. Thus, nowadays, the higher educational process is challenging and stressful for the both: college students, who are not able to meet academic demands, and teachers who have to work with new varied categories of students. The dean of the faculty of foreign languages described the situation at the faculty as the following:

Stress is coming from everywhere: on the one hand – the students are weaker, on the other – we have to meet high academic standards set by the Ministry of Education and to satisfy the accreditation and assessment demands (the dean of the faculty of foreign languages, interview, February 2008).

Among other sources of stress and frustration, mentioned by the students, were low scholarships, short breaks between the lectures and consequently no time to eat at the canteen⁷, poorly organised and constantly changing timetable of the exams, seminars and lectures (sometimes during the day), lack of good studying materials, studying in the corridors or canteen because of the lack of auditoriums⁸, poor quality of teaching at some courses, lack of men at the faculty (both academics and students). In addition, the students experience psychological stress while using the library and photocopiers. The source of stress is the faculty assistants working there who are supposed to help students to find the right books or help with copying of materials.⁹ On the contrary, according to the interviewed students, the assistants there were usually rude and unhelpful.

When asked the question about how they handle their stress, most 1-year and 5-year students claimed they talked about their problems to their friends, classmates and parents. For most

⁷ Students at the university usually have a 15 minute's break between lectures. Additionally there is one half-an-hour break in the middle of the day which is usually not enough to buy a meal at the canteen due to huge queues.

⁸ Because of the growing numbers of students accepted at the university, the faculty of foreign languages is experiencing the urgent need in auditoriums. Thus, students and their teachers often have to have lectures in the corridors, canteen or the resting room for teachers.

⁹ There is no electronic loan system or electronic book catalogues at Pomor State University. Thus, most of the services are supported by human resources. The same applies to the copying services - students are not allowed to use photocopy machines by themselves, but have to ask faculty assistants to make copies for them.

respondents the most effective way of dealing with academic stress was discussing their difficulties with classmates who were usually suffering from the same problems. In addition, parents also appear to be a good support for most of the respondents¹⁰. Conversely, those who lived far from their families were deprived of parents' help while having emotional disorders at the university.

One of the respondents noted the following way of dealing with mental health disorders:

I let my anger and frustration with the university come loose on my parents. I know it's so terrible and unfair. But I know they will forgive me anyway. And I feel that I hurt them and afterwards I feel even worse because of this...This is a closed circle, I see no way out of this situation. I think I'm getting crazy (1-year student, February 2008).

In addition, some students would shut themselves from others and cry alone to let their emotions out. Among other ways of getting away from the problems at the university, the students named holidays, going abroad or simply hoping for the best.

It is of interest, that 5-year students added they had hardly ever filled out any questionnaires at the university about their psychological health. Nor had the students ever come across any leaflets about stress managing at the university. This was supported by the 1-year students, too, though the last ones did not have as long studying experience on campus as the 5-year students. All respondents were, however, sure that such questionnaires are of urgent necessity at the university:

Nobody cares about our welfare at the university. Do we like our teachers, timetables, auditoriums? This is actually nobody's concern. The position of the administration is the following: nobody keeps you at the university if you don't like how things function here (a 5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

According to the pro-rector in extracurricular work, this atmosphere of ignoring students' needs is going to change for the better. The team of the new rector, that had taken the lead two months before the interviews took place, were starting to discuss the ways of getting into closer contact with students by coming to the faculties and talking about learners'

¹⁰ Due to financial problems and the lack of student residences, it is common in Russian cities that young people live with their parents while pursuing higher education. Usually, only those students, who come from other cities or villages, live in student residences.

concerns and worries. Due to the pro-rector in extracurricular work, the goal of such talks and discussions is to make students believe that they are active participants of the studying process and can, thus, contribute to the changes within the university.

4.2.2 The problem of students' adaptation to the university

The experience of the interviewed 1-year students shows that the first weeks at the university were particularly challenging for them in different aspects. One of the respondents described her experience as the following:

The first three weeks was just a nightmare. I used to come back home and have hysterics in front of my parents screaming: "I will not go there again! Everyone there is bad!" Then after some time it became better, I started to feel myself as a part of the class community (a 1-year student, focus group, February 2008).

Most of the interviewed students pointed out that they used to have a strongly united high school class who used to be very close to each other. Thus, it was almost a shock for them as freshmen at the university to meet and adjust to their new classmates, unknown people, whom they had to start communicating with and studying together. Some students claimed they even considered dropping out from the university because of the difficulties with adjusting to the new surroundings and new people.

Even the first day at the university, which is supposed to be an especially festive one for all freshmen, did not turn out to be a pleasant experience for the students. The respondents reported they were frightened by the crowds of unknown people and felt themselves as strangers. The experience of the 1-year students was in line with the one of the 5-year students', though the latter confessed they did not remember the first week at the university very well. Furthermore, the 5-year students pointed out that the transition from high school to the university was not academically very different from each other: there was the same share of academic work overload at the university, just like in high school.

However, the 1-year students' answers leave no doubt that freshmen are in sharp need of some kind of introduction into the university life during the first weeks on university campus:

When we came to the university as fresh students, nobody told us where to go if we need help. If there are some support services for students at the university, we simply don't know anything about them (a 1-year student, focus group, February 2008).

We were all left by ourselves (a 1-year student, focus group, February 2008).

One of the biggest challenges for the students was to get used to the university system itself which was unfamiliar to them as school-graduates starting at a higher education institution. Naturally, the methods of teaching and learning were different from the ones at school. The 1-year students did not know the most essential and obvious for all Russian students practices, such as the time of examination sessions, for instance. My respondents thought they would not have examinations or tests till the middle of January. Thus, they were taken by surprise and were shocked when at the beginning of December they were informed that the first tests would start in the end of the month.¹¹

At the same time, all the interviewed university officials claimed there are many practices and activities aimed at supporting students at their first meeting with the university and their successful integration into university life. Among these is the booklet called To the Freshman which is given to every new student of Pomor State University since 2005. Students can find there useful information about the history of the university, the members of the university administration, the deans of all faculties and their duties, the university's rules concerning exams and tests, grades and delays of the studies, dropping out from the university, library and computer resources, map over the university's buildings and student residences, different organisations on campus and the calendar of the university events. Furthermore, the interviewees among the university administration maintained that among other practices that are aimed at cultivation of students' mutual feeling of belonging to the university community, is the university's annual concert Debut of the Freshman where new students can show their talents in dancing, singing, theatre skills, playing musical instruments and others.

Additionally, according to the manager of the Department of extracurricular work, every organization at the university contributes to the freshmen's adaptation to the university life during the first 1,5 months of the autumn semester each year. For instance, every faculty organizes a hiking trip outside the city where freshmen have to fulfill a range of different

¹¹ It is a usual university practice that during the examination session students have test the last weeks of December, while the exams start approximately from the 12th of January. Often the administration decide upon the days of the exams in the end of December, so students do not have a timetable of their exams by that time.

tasks (for example, crossing the river or wind-fallen trees) after which they are “consecrated” into the students of Pomor State University by senior students. There is also a so-called Day of the Freshman which has had long traditions at the university and is organized every autumn semester. During this day, all new students of the university can take part in different games and contests, watch the concert with the best university’s dancers, singers, humorists and dance at the disco party in the evening. According to the university administration, all these extracurricular offers on campus are aimed at increasing freshmen’s social competence and contribute to students’ positive experience during their first year at college.

4.2.3 The need for psychological help for students at the university

The 1-year students claimed they had a psychologist at school, thus, they said there should be one at the university, too. At the same time, they were not aware of any psychological help service at Pomor State University. Senior students pointed out that they had heard of psychological counseling on campus. However, they were determined that nobody was using the opportunity to share their psychological problems as, in their view, it is considered shameful for a Russian person to apply for psychological help. One of the 5-year students explained this as following:

Russian people would rather bare their problems inside or talk to their families than seek a consultation of a professional psychologist. The reason is our mentality. We are not yet ready for such services. Abroad it is considered to be a normal thing to visit a psychologist. In our country, seeking help at the psychologists’ would confirm that you are mentally sick. I think if there are mental health counseling services in Russia, they are not popular among people. Russians are full of prejudices; another thing is that they are afraid that counseling there is not confidential (a 5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

Thus, the students meant that when experiencing psychological disorders it was more comfortable for them to talk to a close person, one of the family, who knew them and could understand the reasons for their actions and feelings. This view was also supported by the pro-rector in extracurricular work who doubted that Russian people would go to an unknown person for psychological help, even a professional one. At the same time, the 1-year students claimed that, while at school, they used to go to a school mental health specialist. However, they would not like the idea of going to the university psychological service. The

respondents confessed they would rather go to their school psychologist should they develop any mental disorders.

Moreover, the 5-year students stated that they would not go to the university psychological counseling with their mental problems either. May be they would if this service was recommended by friends who had already got help there; alternatively, if they were in urgent need for mental help, they would rather use psychological counseling somewhere outside the university. This was due to the students' doubt about the confidentiality at the university mental health counselling. In spite of all the assurance on behalf of the university psychological service that their consultations were highly confidential, the students said that there was no guarantee this was true. This opinion was in line with the point of view of the dean of the faculty of foreign languages who thought the problem of ethic, following the ethical/medical norms and confidentiality had to be highly prioritised at the university's psychological service.

However, the answer to my question about the students' need to get help from a professional psychologist was affirmative. This view was also supported by both the manager of the psychological service on campus and the dean of the faculty of psychology who thought it was obvious that contemporary Russian students are in need of psychological knowledge. In fact, according to the dean of the faculty of psychology, the Russian Ministry of Education has come with the recommendation for Russian universities to establish psychological services for students. In practice, it is up to universities themselves to decide about the necessity of introducing this kind of psychological support structure on their campuses.

As such, the interviewed students at Pomor State University had a perception that psychological help for students was not a priority of the university administration. In their opinion, the administration/deans of the faculties pretend that students do not have any difficulties while pursuing higher education at Pomor State University, hence, they do not need any psychological counseling on campus. This is, however, contradicted with the findings from the interview with the dean of the faculty of foreign languages who was well aware of high levels of stress even among most successful students of the faculty. In her view, much in students' perception of the university practices depended on the academics and their abilities to provide an educational atmosphere with maximum learning and stimulating environment. The dean even confirmed that because of the strained relationship between the staff and students, the faculty of foreign languages is the most stressful for students to study at. This view was shared by the manager of the psychological service who

pointed out that the faculty of foreign languages is among the university faculties which is in most urgent need for psychological help. Her conclusion was based on the numbers of students from the faculty of foreign languages who had sought consultation at the service.

Yet, the dean of the faculty of foreign languages pointed out the neglect of the problem of academic stress among students among the university administration. The interviewee could not remember a single time during her 9-year administrative experience at the university when students' mental health was discussed at the level of administration. In her opinion, this was due to more urgent social problems the university has been facing the last years, such as the lack of student residences, lack of authentic studying materials and textbooks, low scholarships:

May be the administration will turn their attention to the students' psychological wellness after these problems are solved. How can we start minimising the levels of students' stress without having solved their social problems?! (the dean of the faculty of foreign languages, interview, February 2008)

It should be mentioned that the university's desperate need for funds was considered to be the most important obstacle to promoting students' wellness on campus by all respondents at the level of administration.

At the same time, both 1-year and 5-year students were sure that the university must address the issues of students' academic stress, as in their view this is one of the most serious problems among students at higher education institutions in Russia. The students were sure that it is the university's responsibility to facilitate students' mental wellness; thus, due to the extensive psychological disorders among many students at the university the administration should give it the first priority:

It's your own decision if you want to use the psychological service on campus or not. But mental health experts must be at the university (a 1-year student, focus group, February 2008).

-...it is the university's ultimate responsibility to help its students. But they (the administration) prefer to behave as if the problem of student stress doesn't exist (a 5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

- But how can the university assist students if they don't want to turn for help at the psychological counselling? (my question)

- By changing the system of education as a whole and academic staff in particular. Students shouldn't be afraid of their teachers (a 5-year student, focus group, February 2008).

This last comment refers to the students' dissatisfaction with the teachers' excessive power and authority at Russian higher education institutions, mentioned earlier. Among other concrete suggestions on how to improve the overall psychological situation at the faculty, the students offered the introduction of anonymous questionnaires where they would fearlessly assess the activities of the academics and report to the administration the cases of unfair treatment on behalf of their teachers.

As for the psychological counseling on campus of Pomor State University, the students were not eager to seek psychological help there due to several reasons: first of all, the respondents were sceptical to the fact that the consulting sessions at this service were held by 5-year students of the faculty of psychology who were going to graduate from the university. My respondents said they would never apply to an unprofessional young psychologist who does not have much consulting experience. The students were afraid that unprofessional psychological consulting could worsen or even harm their mental state:

Never in my life will I go there! (a 5-year student and a 1-year student about taking contact with the university psychological service, focus groups, February 2008)

What's the point of going to our psychological service if there are no professional consultants there? (a 5-year student, focus group, February 2008)

In other words, both 1-year and 5-year students agreed that they would rather trust an adult psychologist, minimum ten years older than they are, and with a long consulting practice. In this respect, the dean of the faculty of psychology stressed the following:

If one doesn't want to apply for help to a psychology student, they wouldn't go to an adult psychologist either. Our students, before they start consulting at our psychological service, are finished with 80% of the practical courses which they are to master. That's why they have all necessary competence to advise on people. Moreover, if they come across any difficult situations and don't know what to do, they can get help from our teachers who are supervising and controlling all the work that is done at the service (the dean of the faculty of psychology, interview, February 2008).

Another reason for the students' unwillingness to turn to the university's psychological service for help was the fact that they did not know anything about the specialists working there. The students were not eager to go to the unknown people to talk about their mental health disorders. In their mind, it could be useful if the campus mental health specialists came to the faculties to talk about their activities and try some workshops with the students. Then the students would know them by face and, may be, use the opportunity to go to the psychological service on their own in future, if needed.

In this respect, the dean of the faculty of psychology confirmed the voluntary ability of the psychological service to come to the faculties with a series of workshops. She argued, however, that though the deans of all university faculties were informed about this possibility for their students, there had been only one dean who was eager to carry out psychological workshops at their faculty¹². However, at the interview, the dean of the faculty of foreign languages supported the idea of the workshop training at the university. In her opinion, in order to promote student mental wellness the psychological service should expand its activities and the range of services; for example, arrange courses and workshops for the academic staff, too. Presumably, the university faculties would be more eager to facilitate the service's contact with their students and teachers.

4.2.4 Students' psychological service on campus

The psychological service for students was established on the basis of the faculty of psychology and has existed at Pomor State University since 2002. In fact, the counseling service has been truly functioning since 2006 when it won a university's financial grant for extending its activities. Originally, the psychological service was intended to be a practice field for psychology students who needed to practice their psychological skills and abilities in practically-oriented studying courses before graduating from the university.

Thus, the whole idea of creating a psychological counseling on campus at Pomor State University appeared by virtue of the need for professional practice for psychology students, rather than by virtue of helping college students with their psychological disorders. Moreover, this was not the initiative of the university administration, but rather of the senior psychology students' and of the staff of the faculty of psychology. Nowadays, the staff of the

¹² There are 21 faculties at Pomor State University (see the Introduction chapter).

service consists of 20 actively consulting senior students and one manager. During the second half of year 2007, the psychological service had carried out about 400 consultations and 50 psychological workshops. The manager of the service reported that it is mostly 2-year and 3-year students who apply for psychological help at the service.

According to the service's manager, they offer a wide range of psychological activities not only for the students on campus, but also for different population categories in the city: school-children, school-leavers who are going to enter a university, their parents, school-teachers and ordinary adult citizens. The focus of consulting at the psychological service is parent-child relationships, relationships with other sex, management of time, studying problems, employment concerns and others. As for academic stress, which is the main interest of the current study, the manager of the psychological service claimed it is not of priority among today's students. The interviewee claimed that even if students come to the service to discuss academic stress, it turns out that there are other intrapersonal and interpersonal issues that are the source of students' difficulties with studies. Thus, according to the manager of the psychological service, first it is crucial to solve students' concerns with intra- and interpersonal relationships, as in her view, academic stress is just a consequence of other types of stress.

In addition, the psychological service does not hold any special workshops for dealing with academic stress problems. However, they do have courses to help students with their emotional problems and a range of negative states such as anger, jealousy, offence, envy, the feeling of guilt. Usually the counseling service gives an announcement at the university newspaper Lomonosovets about these courses inviting students who want to work with their negative emotions. The groups are usually made of 15-20 people and arrange weekly meetings for 1,5 - 2 months.

However, according to the dean of the faculty of psychology, the services offered at the university's psychological counseling are not enjoying popularity among students or the faculty administration in spite of the fact that they are free of charge. According to the dean of the faculty of psychology,

...there is no need for psychological services among Russian citizens. Some students don't understand why one needs a psychologist. One of our recent studies showed that many students are surprised to here that there is a faculty of psychology at our university, and that there is a psychological service for students though we started to

put our advertisements at the faculties already in 2002 (the dean of the faculty of psychology, interview, February 2008).

At the same time, according to the manager of the university psychological counseling, their service is a small organization with limited opportunities. They have no funding to publish leaflets, to advertise their work to students, to survey students at all university's faculties. Thus, the activities and growing potential of the service are constrained by considerable financial pressures. Answering my question about students' lack of knowledge about the activities of the service, the manager admitted that they had planned to come to all faculties on campus and advertise their work. But, in her words, there are more urgent concerns that are to be solved first. In fact, the psychological service does not have a single auditorium; instead the consultants have to use the premises of the faculty of psychology which is in the lack of auditoriums, too.

Moreover, the service did not have an official status as an organization within the university when this study took place. Thus, it could not count on support from the university administration as a financial stakeholder. Furthermore, the position of the manager of the service was not even a legitimate one. The person in charge did not even have official salary, but worked voluntary and was sometimes rewarded by the financial means of the faculty of psychology.

The problem is the following: the university doesn't allow us having a legitimate position of a manager at our psychological service for students which we need desperately. I discussed this question at the university's Academic Council several times but the university can not afford introducing a new position right now; in fact the amount of positions at the university is reducing now. The university does not have resources to introduce new positions, especially when it comes to non-academic issues such as a psychological service for students. At the same time they do have funds and vacancies to introduce new posts for pro-rectors at the university, but no positions for the students service (the dean of the faculty of psychology, interview, February 2008).

Thus, because of financial pressures, many activities of the student psychological service at Pomor State University are constrained. Carrying out questionnaires on students' mental health is, for example, done only for students of the faculty of psychology. The dean of the

faculty of psychology admitted that they could help the other faculties with this work, too, provided they are given financial resources by the university administration.

4.3 Student support structures at the University of Oslo

4.3.1 Student counseling

Student counseling at the University of Oslo is a free and confidential service dedicated to supporting students by a team of professional counselors. Students can turn to them for help and advice in a wide range of issues – personal, social or financial.

In year 2007, 717 students were offered consulting at the service making up 1750 consultations face-to-face, by mail and telephone (according to the official website of the Foundation for Student life in Oslo, SiO). Consultations are usually done individually, in pairs or groups if students want their partners, friends or family to be included in the counseling sessions. Those who need advice can make an appointment with a counselor or use the drop-in service during one hour every day which allows short-time discussion on urgent issues without having to wait for an appointment. Due to the growing number of students seeking help at the service, the number of permanent employees at the Student counseling has grown too, making up today six social counselors and one manager.

Most common problems that students come to discuss with counselors are delays in studies, concentration problems, guidance to the State Educational Loan Fund, problems with the national insurance office or other public services, rights when it comes to pregnancy, childbirth and children, discrimination by university staff or other students (according to the official website of the Foundation for Student life in Oslo, SiO). A lot of students apply to talk about such personal issues as chronic illnesses, abortions, problems with a partner, grief, sudden tragic accidents, solitude, drug addiction, gay and lesbian issues. The service reports that about one third of students who seek help at Student counseling have emotional problems. Furthermore, during the last years there has been a continuous growth in the number of those who have problems with academic issues.

One of the main aims of the service is supplying students with important information about their rights in difficult situations in accordance with the Norwegian public administrative bodies. However, if a problem, a student needs help with, is out of their competence,

institutional counseling staff direct them to other specialists within the university support structures such as Student Health service, psychologists, studying consultants and others.

Among the activities of the Student counseling there are a number of courses and workshops, for example, for people with eating disorders, for those who have lost their close relatives, who have difficulties with speaking in public or holding a report. In addition, the service arranges annual questionnaires on students' drug abuse and other social problems (according to the official website of the Foundation for Student life in Oslo, SiO).

Another important activity which is given high priority by the Student counseling is preventative written information for students in the form of booklets and leaflets. These are materials published both in English and Norwegian which are easy to come across to on campus. They provide students with information on such issues as, for example, how to reduce stress and anxiety while studying, how to handle exams and illnesses, and many other. This work is seen by the university social counselors as an important one in order to try to solve students' problems at an early stage.

Of great importance is Student counselling's coordination of work and frequent contact with many organisations for students on campus, such as Student Health services, Career Centre, the Foundation for Student life in Oslo (SiO), Student parliament, as well as, some important external partners such as the State Educational Loan Fund.

4.3.2 Student Health services' psychiatric/psychological section

The psychiatric/psychological section at the University of Oslo is a part of Student Health services and consists of two departments situated on campus. Their services are free of charge for those students who have their general practitioner at the university health services.

The idea to have a permanent psychologist at the university appeared already in 1959 and belonged to the Student Parliament on campus. However, because of the "difficulties in finding a doctor who had a special interest in this sphere of work" (Nilsen, 1989: 79), the appointment of a psychologist on campus was postponed. It was only in 1967 when the first psychologist was appointed at the Student Health service on a part-time job basis, while the first psychiatrist started to consult students there a year later (Ottosen, 2005).

During the first year 535 consultations were held for students by the psychologist and 387 by the psychiatrist (Nilsen, 1989: 80). As the years past by, the amount of consultations had grown up to 1600-1800 per year at the psychological section and up to 1600-2200 – at the psychiatric one (*ibid.*). Later the activities of these services were extended to include group therapy which led to the growth in the number of specialists working at the section.

Per today, a total of ten campus mental health experts (with equal number of psychologists and psychiatrists) and two receptionists offer free consultations for students who think they need professional mental help (according to the official website of the Foundation for Student life in Oslo, SiO). A wide range of problems can be the reason for applying to the section, varying from problems with studying to other more general psychological problems. Mental health specialists at the university work mostly with evaluation, short-time psychotherapy, as well as, group therapy. Students can make an appointment beforehand or get urgent help at once, if needed. It is of interest that university's employees can not apply for any psychological/psychiatric help at the section. Thus, this service is only for students.

Among the examples of special courses offered by the psychiatric/psychological section at the University of Oslo are group talks on how to handle fear to speak in public, fear to take exams, academic stress, social fear, uncertainty in yourself and your abilities, and even fear of going to the dentist. The usual practice at the section is that each group includes up to 7-8 members who meet every week for a period of 5-10 weeks. On the individual basis, students are welcome to talk to mental health specialists about such problems as phobias, fainting, dizziness, loneliness, depressions, etc.

4.3.3 The Buddy system

The introduction of the Buddy system at the University of Oslo was an initiative of Student Parliament, just as in the case with the psychiatric/psychological section. The Buddy system was founded in 1993 and is aimed at giving the new Norwegian and international students at the university a positive start to their studies. Every year more than 800 international and 6000 Norwegian students are welcomed by their buddies (according to the official website of the Foundation for Student life in Oslo, SiO). By being automatically signed up for the system, all new students get a chance of acquiring a social network and a sense of belonging to academic community from the first days on campus. The main aim of the foundation is to make students' start at the university easier by showing them around the campus, giving

information about the academic aspects of the university and introducing them to the various students' organizations and societies.

Before a centrally coordinated Buddy system was established, three university faculties had had long traditions in arranging similar activities for their students. Thus, the idea of establishing this kind of foundation for students was not new, but before 1993 some faculties at the University of Oslo were excluded from it (Ottosen, 2005). Therefore, with the financial support from the University administration the Buddy system committee was established in order to involve and welcome all new students on campus. In addition, the Buddy Menu – a program of social and cultural activities during the first two weeks of the semester – was added to the system in 1994.

Nowadays, the Buddy system consists of three board members, eight assistants from different faculties of the university and a large number of buddies (around a thousand experienced students from all university faculties). Every student of the university who wants to help new students and introduce them to the University and student life can become a buddy after receiving the necessary training and instructions. Buddy's duties are to get in contact with students and staff, take initiative and arrange activities for students at the semester start, coordinate buddies' activities, teach new buddies, contact media, work out the information for students and buddies.

At the semester start, all new students are divided in groups of 15-20 people from the same studying program and are assigned a buddy from the same faculty as a leader of the group. Buddy groups may consist of Norwegian students only, international students only or there may be a mix of both categories in one group. After the welcoming ceremony for new students at Universitetsplassen, the students and their buddies have lunch together and then continue with a guided tour around the campus. During the next two weeks buddies and their groups meet regularly for numerous social and cultural activities at the university. Buddy's aim is to encourage the new students to get to know each other by making them participate in different activities together. Buddies for international students also help them to get necessary information about Norwegian student welfare system and insight into the Norwegian society in general.

It is important to mention that being a full member of the educational system at the university, the Buddy system has close connections to the faculties, staff, academics, administration, as well as, Student Parliament, the Norwegian Students' foundation, Study

Festival and other unions and organizations on campus. The most important partner for the system is the University of Oslo itself which is also the main financial stakeholder. The Buddy system has several external partners and sponsors as well, such as, Alcohol and Drug Addiction service, the network of bookstores Akademika and others.

4.3.4 The ability of Pomor State University to establish a Norwegian system of student support structures on campus

Some of the interviewed 5-year students at Pomor State University, who had studied an exchange semester at the University of Tromsø in Norway, remembered the introductory courses for all new students at the semester start organised by the university Buddy system. The students claimed this to have been both an unforgettable experience and useful introduction into students' life which, in their view, contributed to easier integration into the academic community and general practices on campus. In Russia at the start of the university life, the only information they got was the introductory course on how to use the library.

After the 1-year students learned about the Buddy system in Norway, they maintained that part of this work was done by their main teacher during the first days at the university. She held special workshops for them to help them get to know each other during the first classes at the faculty of foreign languages. In addition, she also taught them the main rules of behaviour at the faculty (for example, which clothes not to wear, how to greet the teachers, how to dress and behave at the exam). However, the students were not sure if other groups got the same help from their mentors. Moreover, both the 1-year and the 5-year students were positive to the idea of introducing at Pomor State University the student support system similar to the Buddy system in Norway. They were sure that such introductory courses would be of great help to all freshmen at the university.

Furthermore, some of the 5-year students heard that similar courses do exist at some faculties of Pomor State University where new students work in groups with a professional psychologist during the whole day at the start of the semester. This information was supported by the pro-rector in extracurricular work and the dean of the faculty of psychology, who claimed they had organised such introductory courses for their students for the last two years. According to the dean, the students are engaged in getting-to-know-each-other workshops the first 3-4 days on campus; in addition, they are shown around the campus and get acquainted with the academic staff at the faculty. The pro-rector in

extracurricular work also confessed that such introductory courses were held at a couple of other faculties of the university. Answering my question if this work could be done at all the faculties with the support from the university administration, the pro-rector emphasised this would be difficult because of the huge size of the university and loosely coupled faculties situated in different parts of the city.

Furthermore, the manager of the Department of extracurricular work suggested that the faculties would be reluctant to make such introductory courses for their students because of the lack of auditorial time. The fact is that every faculty at the university is given a certain amount of hours for lectures and seminars, as well as, a certain amount of studying material that should be taught to the students within these time limits. Having difficulties with allocation of time for a large volume of studying material, the university faculties are simply not able to organize any extracurricular activities for their students, especially at the start of the semester. Another problem, due to the respondents of the study, is that extracurricular work has never been prioritised by the university administration and, thus, set behind the academic one.

However, the people's consciousness is changing nowadays. Many things are changing now. The administration of the university is starting to understand that if a student is exhausted by the studies, they can not function, can not show their abilities, can not defend the honour of the university. The faculties themselves understand that extracurricular work is a must and students' adaptation to the university is important, too. Many students are scared of the university start, also because of a lot of practical problems that could be solved by a buddy system (the manager of the Department of extracurricular work, interview February 2008).

In this aspect, the dean of the faculty of foreign languages was very positive about the possibility of introducing an introductory system similar to the Norwegian Buddy system at Pomor State University. She maintained that it is possible to devote several hours during the first week in September to a set of activities that would help students adapt to the university life. At least, this could be implemented at the faculty level if not centrally-coordinated; may be the faculty of foreign languages could start with such courses already the following year. This would however solve the problem of freshmen's adaptation to the university life just at one of the university faculties, thus leaving aside the other ones.

Generally speaking, when it comes to the ability of Pomor State University to introduce the Norwegian support structures for students, the main obstacle the university would encounter is the lack of financial resources. As such, the Norwegian system of support structures is too complex for a Russian university, not mentioning that establishing such a system would claim a lot of managerial, personnel and funding resources. According to both deans, of the faculty of foreign languages and of the faculty of psychology, every service on campus needs personnel, administrative policies, premises and sufficient wage rates. Nowadays, Pomor State University can not afford supplying the growth of psychological counseling on campus with financial resources because of the general lack of these resources at the university. The administration do not have the opportunity to give fiscal support even to the only one mental health service established on campus – the psychological service – though they claim they understand the need of a centrally-organized student psychological service and support the idea. The university's pro-rector in extracurricular work confessed that such service is of relevance and importance for contemporary Russian society.

However, a shared view between all the respondents of the faculty and university administration is that it is next to impossible to follow the example of the University of Oslo in Russia and introduce a multiple-level support structure for college students. Amongst the obvious obstacles, one can name the general resistance of Russian people to psychological counseling, discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as, the difficulty to control the faculties' activities due to the loosely-coupled character of the university's structure with a lot of faculties scatted in the whole city.

In addition, the pro-rector in extracurricular work thought that all the necessary support structures for students are already established at Pomor State University, nevertheless students, in her view, will be developing psychological disorders. This is due to the fact that there is no order in university practices and organizational policies. When the academic demands are clarified to students, when students are aware of the criteria for the grades and are given well-defined information about the dates of the exams, tests, lectures, etc., they are less worried, thus, less stressed. Hence, according to the pro-rector in extracurricular work, the most essential step in order to prevent developing mental health problems among learners is to bring consistency into academic and administrative procedures at Pomor State University.

This view was also supported by the dean of the faculty of foreign languages who also added that students' mental health is to a great extend dependable on the teachers' ability to

organise the teaching process. Thus, in order to alleviate high levels of academic stress among college students it is of importance to change teaching culture at the faculty of foreign languages and at the whole university in general.

In addition, though generally denying the opportunity to introduce a Norwegian system of centrally coordinated support structures, the dean of the faculty of psychology thought it would be of advantage to establish contacts with foreign universities in order to exchange experience and ideas on how to facilitate students' mental health, as well as, students' extracurricular activities. Also the pro-rector in extracurricular work and the dean of the faculty of foreign languages concurred that contemporary academics and some of the members of faculties' administration think that students come to the university with one goal: to obtain academic knowledge. Thus, all non-academic activities are not given the necessary priority. In this respect, a shared view among the participants of this study is that the contact with higher education institutions abroad would facilitate the necessary change in Russian institutional practices toward making Russian universities a more favourable place to study.

4.4 Summary

The main findings of the study, presented in this chapter, give an overview of the psychological wellness of the students at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, as well as, the campus support structures both at the Russian university and the University of Oslo. The conducted fieldwork in Russia has identified high levels of mental health disorders among the students of the faculty of foreign languages. Both freshmen and senior students are subjected to academic stress at the university due to the problems with adapting to the higher education institution and university life, unfair assessment on behalf of the academic staff, constantly changing timetable, lack of auditoriums and many others.

Moreover, some students are not aware of the existence and services of the psychological counseling on campus which is meant to maintain students' mental health. However, those who are informed about the possibility to apply to the psychological service for help, are not willing to do so due to the fact that consultations there are held by psychology students who have not yet graduated from the university. In addition, the psychological counseling service

at Pomor State University has limited functions and activities due to the absence of financial support from the university administration.

On the contrary, the analysis of the counseling services at the University of Oslo suggests that Norwegian students are offered a wide range of professional psychological support starting from their first days at the university and during the whole period of studying at a higher educational institution. The fact that the functions of the university psychological counseling are clearly separated and assigned to different services on campus, allows the students to know the right place where to seek professional help, be it a psychological or psychiatric service, social counsellors' service or the Buddy's system. Besides, good advertising helps college students to learn about the support structures existing at the University of Oslo from the first weeks on campus.

The shared view among the interviewed policy makers and policy implementers in Russia is that it is next to impossible to introduce a similar student support structure on campus at Pomor State University. One of the biggest obstacles is the general lack of funding assigned to extracurricular activities at the Russian university. In addition, it would be difficult for the student support system to put its activities into practice at all university faculties due to the extensive independence that the faculties are enjoying the last decades.

Moreover, the respondents in Russia assumed that psychological counseling alone would not lessen the levels of students' academic stress. In their view, the whole complex of administrative measures aimed at improving the university's practices and arrangements, thus, making easier the whole studying process for students, is necessary in order to maintain psychological wellness among learners.

5 Discussions and conclusions

5.1 Introduction

The present study was aimed at exploring the levels of academic stress among college students and the university's role in fostering students' psychological well-being. Having chosen the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk in Russia as a main location of the fieldwork, I tried to explore how the university administration, policy implementers and students perceive the importance and necessity of facilitating students' mental health on campus, also by introducing a varied student support structure. In this framework, the following research questions were identified as the main ones for the present study:

1. How do the students of the faculty of foreign languages perceive the need for Russian students to have a psychological service on campus? What kind of psychological help do they need?
2. What is the role of the university in students' acquiring psychological problems on campus? How can students' mental health be facilitated by the university?
3. How is the issue of students' academic stress addressed at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk? What measures and support structures are introduced by the administration of the university in order to reduce academic stress in students?
4. What are the possibilities of introducing at Pomor State University support structures similar to those at the University of Oslo?

The conducted fieldwork in Russia was meant to shed light on these research areas. The following chapter represents an attempt to discuss the main findings of the fieldwork, presented in Chapter 4, in the light of the above mentioned research questions and the theoretical framework, discussed in Chapter 2. Aspects of both theoretical perspectives (the individual psychological framework of the student and the interconnection between power, university and individual) will be used in the current chapter while analyzing the data gathered.

The discussion is followed by the recommendations to different higher education stakeholders at Pomor State University that would facilitate students' mental health on

campus, as well as, the ideas for further research in this important area. Finally, concluding remarks to the whole study are presented.

5.2 Discussion of the main findings

The findings of the fieldwork conducted in one of the Russian universities have revealed the necessity of paying serious attention to the problem of psychological health in Russian higher education. The Russian students' discussions on the perceived high levels of stress while studying at the university are in line with the general mental health trends in many other countries in the world. Most studies, mentioned in this thesis (for instance, Eshun, 2002; Howard et al., 2006; Kadison, 2004; Kitzrow, 2003; Martin et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006; Palmer & Puri, 2006), assert that the number of students subjected to high levels of psychological discomfort while pursuing higher education is increasing each year. These alarming results of the studies can't be underestimated, mostly due to the annually increasing number of severe depressions and suicidal attempts among young people attending higher education institutions.

The world trend of deteriorating mental health among students is also confirmed by Russian researchers (Belinskaya, 2005; Iepishkin et al., 2008; Kozlova, 2002; Mendzeritskiy et al., 2001; Zaharov & Churekova, 2005). These studies argue that contemporary students in Russia are subjected to high levels of intellectual and psycho-emotional overload resulting in strong emotional stress and anxiety, severe eating and sleeping disorders, depressions, diseases, loss of interest in studies, sport, and outdoor activities. These assertions go in line with the findings of this study, namely, with the students' answers about the psychological and physical pressures they experience at the university.

In particular, the respondents in Russia claimed they were subjected to most academic pressures discussed in chapter 2 (see 2.2.4.1). According to the higher education research (McDonald et al., 2006), these are the pressures that can be avoided; thus, the university is able to attenuate them by specific practices and procedures. However, the findings of this study do not indicate that this responsibility has been addressed by the Russian university. All interviewed students reported that their ability to engage into successful academic learning was constantly suppressed by emotional disorders experienced during the whole period of studying at the university. Among frequently mentioned academic stressors was

constant pressure of maintaining good grades, exam stress, fear for failing an exam, having to master extensive knowledge within a short period of time, lack of faculty response to students' needs, lack of leisure time, and strained relationship with academics.

In addition to academic pressures, the students claimed they were also exposed to both environmental pressures (problems with the timetable, lack of studying rooms, lack of time to eat at the canteen, lack of sleep, low scholarships, lack of men at the faculty) and intrapersonal ones (changed sleeping and eating habits). These pressures, as reported by studies (Dutta et al., 2006; McDonald et al., 2006) are in close interplay with academic stressors, which are the main focus of this study, and thus can add to the extensive levels of academic pressures among students.

Moreover, the students at Pomor State University mentioned one academic pressure which has not been much discussed in the previous research on stress in college students, but which seemed to be the most stressful issue for the interviewed students in Russia. Namely, fear for the teacher due to the twisted teachers' authority and the authoritarian method of teaching. Presumably, the lack of reporting on this academic pressure among students in other countries may be accounted for the high level of human ideals on international campuses. There, students are considered to be righteous and mature stakeholders in the higher education community and are, consequently, treated with respect. Russian academics, on the contrary, seem to possess too high levels of authority which are negatively affecting psychological state of their students.

There are, however, some international studies (Holt, 1964; Mann, 2008) that, in line with the results of this study, assert that the whole learning process is built on the production of fear in students. Although, these studies refer mostly to the secondary education research, the results of the fieldwork in Russia show that the assumptions of these studies can be also useful for analyzing higher education experience.

Of all the different kinds of fear, common to learners, which were identified in chapter 2 (see 2.3.5), fear of teachers and of not pleasing them was the most frequently mentioned one by the Russian students. The students' answers show that the fear of teacher's authority is generated from the first days at the university subjecting them to everyday stress and feeling of helplessness. Furthermore, the respondents claimed it was useless to talk with the faculty administration about their strained relationships with the academics due to the student's generally suppressed position at the higher education community. Students themselves

confirmed that they represent an inferior group without rights that have lost faith in getting help from anywhere, especially from the administration of the faculty.

In this context, the analysis of the conducted interviews with the administration of Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk suggests that there are several possible reasons that can serve an explanation to why Russian faculty can have so much influence on the mental health of their students. Some of these issues can and should be addressed by the university while others, due to the specific character of the university as a microcosm and particular character of learning at the faculty of the foreign languages, can't be avoided. The main reasons for students' suppressed position at Pomor State University, identified by this study, are as follows:

- the administration's acceptance of the teachers' power over students;
- non-defined criteria for students' assessment (especially at oral examinations);
- too close contact between teachers and students in small learning groups that can increase academics' subjectivity;
- old teaching traditions and general acceptance of the teacher's authority in the Russian higher education community.

The assumption that Russian academics have too much power and influence over their students is consistent with the theoretical perspective of some studies about power operating in a higher education institution and its influence on students' subjective experience of university learning. Researchers (Mann, 2001, 2008; Morgan & Beaty, 1997, in Mann, 2008: 47; Morrow & Torres, 2002) conclude that unavoidable system of power relations is realized through various relations of domination between different groups at the university. This form of domination influences behavior of all participants in the context of higher education; namely, students are exposed to the requirements of academics and administration that are, in their turn, exposed to the requirements of the educational system in general and the ministry of higher education in particular. Students are most susceptible to the workings of power within the university settings as long as they represent the least powerful and righteous group of higher education stakeholders. The mental pressure of feeling powerless and helpless, which is common to college students, can result in dissatisfaction with a higher education institution and consequently, in alienation and stress.

The results of the fieldwork in Russia show that Pomor State University is exerting excessive power over its students. The answers of the interviewed students' confirm that

they do not have any control over how things are functioning at the faculty and the university in general. Being passive participants of higher education process, students at the faculty of foreign languages are subordinated to the institutional practices and specific rules of conduct that are characteristic of workings of power at the contemporary university. This conclusion is in line with Mann's (2001, 2008) assumption that due to their positions, academics and members of the administration at a higher education institution feel righteous and superior towards students. Moreover, in many countries the worsened contact between these two groups at the university results in the fact that students have to find surviving strategies in order to avoid dropping out from the university (Mann, 2008).

This is exactly what the interviewed students in Russia emphasized. Unfair assessment on behalf of the teachers, prioritizing some students over the others, "teachers' right" to do whatever they want at lectures and exams, the administration's ignoring of student's needs have resulted in students' forced adaptation and adjustment to the institutional practices. The majority of the interviewed students maintained that such experience had a strong psychological effect on them which, in its turn, influenced their ability to study and, in some cases, weakened their aim to finish their education.

The faculty administration in their turn confirm that they are well aware of the difficulties the students are experiencing while studying at the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University. Moreover, the members of the university administration agree with the students that it is the university's responsibility to facilitate students' psychological wellness during their studies. However, the findings of the current study show that in practice, little has been done in order to pursue this goal. Even the members of the university administration themselves, together with the policy implementers at the psychological service, confirm that students' psychological health is far from being number one priority in institutional practices.

This is due to a large number of "more urgent", in the administration's view, social problems on campus such as lack of student accommodation, lack of studying materials, low scholarships. Indeed, Russian universities have faced severe financial constraints the last decades due to the general trend of changing economic and social functions of higher education in general. According to a number of studies in higher education research (for example, Castells, 2001; Cloete & Maassen, 2002; De Boer & Coedegebuure, 2003), today's higher education institutions have to face public funding constraints and find other ways of addressing growing fiscal pressures. At the same time, universities have become more

accountable to the society's needs due to the country's increased need in knowledgeable specialists (Castells, 2001; Scott, 1998).

These global trends in the area of higher education have, no doubt, influenced the institutional practices at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, too. The interviews with the members of the university administration show that there have been a lot of changes in the university's functioning during the last decades, including inferring of new funding patterns. Nonetheless, in spite of growing number of commercial activities (such as, for instance, the increase in the number of students who are paying tuition fees, introducing new studying programs and language courses for adult learners, applying for monetary grants at various organizations, facilitating contact with national and foreign higher education institutions and organizations), Pomor State University, according to the administration, is in an urgent need of extra financial recourses.

In this context, one can agree with the university's administration in the importance of using available financial resources for improving such essential issues of students' social welfare as housing, scholarships and studying materials. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that mental wellness of today's students is the issue of health and psychological wellness of the Russian future generation which is going to govern the country in the coming years. This generation is going to work and strive for the economic growth of their country, for attracting international partners and increasing foreign investments, for improving of the contact with the representatives of international political and military alliances and organizations, and, amongst other things, for improvement of social welfare of Russian citizens. Naturally, both physical and psychological wellness of today's young population is essential for achieving these goals. Preserving of people's mental wellness is in this context even more important as, due to Mendzeritshkiy (2001), a person's overall health is much dependable on their emotional state.

Furthermore, as pointed out by many Russian researchers (Belinskaya, 2005; Iepishkin, 2008; Kartysheva, 2005; Kozlova, 2002), it is exactly the health of young generation that is the reason of growing concern among medical specialists in Russia. The results of annual federal reports of the Russian Federation declare that students' health has been drastically deteriorating in comparison with the previous decades (Abaskalova, 2000). One can argue that the possibility that young people can acquire mental health problems at the university is relatively low and depends largely on the individual psychological peculiarities of the mind. Studies (Kozlova, 2002; Zaharov & Churekova, 2005), however, deny that the individual

susceptibility to emotional disorders is the reason for a considerable increase in the number of Russian college students that are characterized by aggressiveness, irritability and anxiety.

This tendency is supported by the results of the present study, too. In fact, none of the interviewed students at Pomor State University denied the fact that they have not been exposed to academic stress while staying at the university. Moreover, the conducted fieldwork allows making a conclusion that the issues of mental health on campus are given much lower priority than other university's concerns. One of the vivid examples of the obvious ignoring of students' mental wellness at Pomor State University is the fact that the university's administration does not support the psychological service, established on campus. At the time when the fieldwork took place, the service had no official status as an organization within the university; consequently, it was functioning without financial support from the university which considerably constrained its activities. In fact, every activity of the service was left to the enthusiasm of the dean and the students of the faculty of psychology.

Moreover, the sheer intention of establishing a psychological service on campus shows the extent to which the administration of Pomor State University interpret the importance of promoting students' mental health on campus. As such, the psychological counseling was not introduced in order to help students with psychological pressures; the aim was to give students from the faculty of psychology the opportunity to practice their skills before they graduated from the university and started working in their professional field.

It is important to mention here that in fact, Russian institutions of higher education are not obliged by law to have psychological counseling for their students. There are no clear guidelines from the Russian Ministry of Education on facilitating psychological health on Russian campuses. In fact, the suggestion about establishing psychological services on universities' campuses, which comes from the Russian Ministry of education, is just a recommendation; thus, universities are allowed to decide for themselves if they want to follow up mental health of their students or not. Hence, one can not be sure about how many Russian higher education institutions actually have psychological counseling on campus.

In this aspect, the neglect of the importance of reducing students' academic stress on behalf of the university administration in Russia contradicts with the perspectives of foreign higher education experts. As pointed out by Martin et al., (2006), universities are obliged to introduce specific policies and procedures in order to reduce stress among college students.

Hence, responding to the importance of facilitating psychological wellness of their students, many foreign campuses are staffed by trained mental health professionals who provide psychological health (McDonald et al., 2006; Kitzrow, 2003). Furthermore, such centers of psychological counseling represent small organizations with managing positions, their own premises and financial support from the universities. Their activities are proved to have an extensive character including publishing of preventative materials, booklets, organizing workshops and seminars, regular screening and surveying of students.

In addition to counseling services, foreign universities use other measures in order to help their students in minimizing psychological pressures at the university. As it was demonstrated by the example of the University of Oslo in Chapter 4 (see 4.3), the university has a system of several student support structures comprising all faculties on campus. Their activities are directed at several aspects of college students' life: student counseling advises students on various personal, social or financial issues, Student Health services' psychological/psychiatric section helps with various psychological problems at the university, the Buddy system's aim is to make students' start at the university easier by introducing them to various aspects of academic and social student life on campus and uniting students from the first days at the university. Most of these support structures have long traditions of successful functioning on campus of the University of Oslo, with the idea of establishing the oldest one (the Psychiatric/psychological section) dating back to 1959. Today, these permanent support structures have a large number of professional counsellors and managers who offer students of the university a wide range of activities for maintaining students' psychological wellness.

As opposed to the University in Oslo, Pomor State University in Russia does not provide its students with such varied psychological assistance. The activities of the psychological service are limited, introductory courses for new students exist only at a limited number of the faculties, while students' counseling on campus does not exist at all.

In fact, one of the aims of this study was to investigate the possibility of introducing at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk student support structures found at the University of Oslo. The answers to this question varied a lot depending on the position of the interviewed stakeholders within the university. Most of the interviewed students of the faculty of foreign languages were positive to the idea of introducing the support structures similar to the Norwegian ones. They claimed Pomor State University is in urgent need of a good psychological counseling service with mental health professionals instead of senior students

practicing their psychological skills. As for the difficulties with adjusting to the unknown higher education experience, the students thought the Norwegian Buddy system would be very useful in reducing stress during the first days on campus.

However, the members of the university and faculty administration did not seem to be as enthusiastic as the students, stressing the financial difficulties the university would encounter in order to establish such complicated Norwegian system of university support structures. They doubted the possibility of introducing so many new positions for managers and counselors at the university, especially considering the fact that Pomor State University doesn't have fiscal resources to introduce even one managerial position for the existing psychological service. Amongst other things pointed out by the interviewees, was the inability of the university to supply these student support services with premises, as it is done at the University of Oslo. The fact is that Pomor State University is in urgent need of auditoriums for teaching purposes, not mentioning the lack of rooms for the teaching staff and rooms at the student residences.

Thus, the respondents at the administration of the university doubted the possibility of introducing exactly the same system of support services on Russian campuses as the one at the University of Oslo. In fact, some of the interviewees at the Russian university even became sad after learning about various forms for mental help for college students in Norway; they hopelessly asserted that it is next to impossible to introduce such a substantial system of psychological support for learners in Russia.

At the same time, certain aspects of the Oslo University support system could serve as an example for Pomor State University in maintaining students' mental health, such as, some activities of the Buddy system. The dean of the faculty of foreign languages, where the fieldwork took place, was enthusiastic about the idea of dedicating a couple of days at the start of the semester to giving the new students practical information about the faculty and institutional practices and traditions. She was however worried that this would lead to the contraction in the obligatory amount of studying hours which are predetermined by the Russian Ministry of education. In addition, this would solve the problem only at one of the numerous faculties of Pomor State University, while the general problem of students' adjustment to college life at other faculties would remain.

On the other hand, there is one question that appeared while conducting the fieldwork in Russia, namely, if a sophisticated system of support structures would be the right solution

for a Russian university in order to promote students' psychological wellness. Moreover, all interviewed university officials claimed there are many activities aimed at supporting students at their first meeting with the university and their successful integration into the university life. However, the administration's perception of having successfully functioning support structures on campus is contradicted by the interviews with the students who didn't think these structures were reaching their goals. The fact that the administration and the students have two opposite perceptions on how the support structures are functioning at the university, leads to two conclusions: 1) there is a strong need in the better dialogue between the administration and the students on the feedback on the success of the support structures' activities, 2) a varied student counseling system is not needed at Russian universities. The doubt is if there is actually a need in introducing new mental health bodies on campus when the route of the problem lies in the worsened teaching and learning culture at the individual faculties.

As discussed earlier, the findings of this study highlighted the necessity of improving the psychological contact between teachers and learners. It is obvious that all discussions about students' academic success and achievement at the university are useless when an individual student is suppressed by the authoritative personality of the teacher and their unfair treatment. The fieldwork showed that what is really needed at the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University is a sustainable change in teaching practices and teaching culture in general through reducing the power distance between students and teachers and starting to treat students like righteous members of the higher education community.

No doubt, teachers' working experience at Pomor State University is subjected to high levels of stress, too. Work overload, lack of free time and family time, low salaries and, consequently, the necessity to find alternative ways of earning money, which contributes to teachers' bad preparation to their classroom activities at the university, influence teachers' abilities to establish the atmosphere of collaborative learning for students. Thus, efforts should be made to create a new collegial teaching culture at the faculty which would contribute to both academics and students' feeling of belonging to the collaborative academic community and the university as a higher education institution as a whole.

In the following paragraph I will present practical recommendations on how to improve teaching culture at Pomor State University in general and at the faculty of foreign languages in particular. In addition I will concentrate on the ways of promotion of psychological

wellness among Russian college students, based on the above discussed issues. Presumably, these recommendations will better accommodate the psychological needs of students at Pomor State University and help them to reduce the amount of academic stress they encounter on campus.

5.3 Recommendations

Research on the extent to which Pomor State University has responded to the responsibility to reduce the level of students' academic stress has revealed many problematic issues that prevent successful facilitating of students' psychological health on campus. The following recommendations, divided into different sections according to the area of responsibilities and spheres of application, are believed to help to diminish stress levels among students at Pomor State University.

It should be, however, stressed that the main condition for the successful implementation of these possible practices is the allocation of sufficient financial resources by the university administration. As long as, according to the university's officials, this is the main obstacle to introducing any initiative for extracurricular activities for students, there is a need in increased share of financial resources allocated by the Russian Ministry of Education.

In addition, it is important to remember that students' life on campus and, hence, their experience of the academic process, are not heterogenic throughout a studying year. The amount of academic stress depends not only on the level university students are studying at, but is also subjected to different phases of the academic year. In my view, the university administration should pay attention to the fact that students are exposed to different problematic issues during particular periods of the year (see Appendix B, Student Stress Calendar). Thus, it is important to coordinate them with the dates when new extra-curricular activities for students are introduced on campus.

Recommendations to the administration of Pomor State University

It has to be stressed that students' psychological health should become one of the priorities in the institutional policies of the university. One of the prerequisites for students' successful

academic life on campus is the administration's support of the activities that facilitate students' mental health. This should first of all include support of the activities of the psychological service on campus in the form of introducing a necessary number of managerial and consulting positions and supplying the service with its own premises/auditoriums. Another important issue is improving the communication between the administration and university students concerning the feedback on the activities for students which is necessary for adjustment to students' actual needs.

In addition, facilitating contact between other Russian and foreign higher education institutions on the ways of reducing academic stress among college students should be considered as one of the priorities among Pomor State University administration. Such exchange of experience would contribute to the administration's better understanding of the necessity of introducing new institutional bodies in order to assist students in their academic experience. In case when it is difficult to establish such a varied system of student support structures as at the University of Oslo, consisting of three institutional bodies, a Russian university could take into consideration separate activities that are used by counseling centers and student structures abroad. For instance, the fieldwork at Pomor State University showed that some activities of the Norwegian Buddy system could be of great help for the new students at the Russian university at a semester-start.

Amongst other things, the following issues may be seen as useful suggestions for consideration on behalf of the university administration:

- Following up and assessment of teaching methods at all faculties, regular surveying of students about their satisfaction with methods of teaching used by the academics;
- Allocating funds for and facilitating professional development for teachers, as well as, improving lack of resources for teaching and research which would considerably reduce teachers' strain and anxiety; consequently, this would have a positive effect on their students' mental state;
- Holding seminars for academics about the changed nature of today's students and the new methods of teaching of non-traditional students;
- Organizing regular obligatory seminars for the university's academics on students' academic stress, its reasons and methods of maintaining it;
- Changing the practice of holding oral examinations: introducing at least one more external teacher to assess students (in addition to the main one who is holding classes) to avoid subjective assessment;

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- Facilitating the activities of the student council and other student organizations on campus which are aware of students' needs.

Recommendations to the administration of the faculty of foreign languages

Judging by the results of the fieldwork of the current study, it is important that the faculty administration address both students and teachers' concerns while solving the problem of students' academic stress. By this I mean that these are both target groups that need support, encouragement and proactive actions on behalf of the faculty administration. The ultimate goal of the faculty administration should be the creation of healthy environment both for students and teachers so that they can share ideas, assist and cooperate with each other, contribute to the creation and transmission of academic knowledge.

Measures for students. It is essential that the faculty administration timely address students' concerns and complaints about unfair assessment on behalf of academics or faculty managers and assistants. The faculty's responsibility is to take measures against differential treatment of students and to reduce the power distance between students and teachers. Regular anonymous surveying of the students on possible pressures during studying at the faculty are seen necessary in order to address students' possible concerns in good time.

Furthermore, there is a need to supply students with correct and clear information on their studies, timetable, requirements, clearly defined criteria for assessment and dates of examinations in advance (preferably at the beginning of each semester) that would lead to students' clearer understanding of the learning demands. Better organization of learners' activities in general would significantly reduce the level of students' uncertainty and anxiety about their academic life.

Measures for academics. The interviews with the students showed that there is a sharp need in sustainable change in teaching practices and teachers' classroom behavior at the faculty of foreign languages. Thus, it is necessary that the faculty allocates funds for teachers' professional development. This does not only imply improving the professional role of the teacher by life-long professional development, but also contributing to the teachers' sense of

belonging to the institution and being a part of a collaborative academic culture. The following measures could be of use in order to achieve this goal:

- Reducing teachers' work overload by hiring more academics and distributing the responsibility for teaching between a larger amount of teachers;
- Strengthening teachers' dialogue with the faculty administration;
- Establishing a Buddy system for academics to follow-up young teachers lacking experience;
- Facilitating overall politeness among university staff including faculty managers and assistants;
- Arranging regular sessions for professional dialogue among academics encouraging them to share experience, reflect upon conflicts between teachers and students, their teaching actions and overall standing among students;
- Facilitating opportunities for informal contact between academics and their students in the form of regular extracurricular activities.

Recommendations to the university psychological service

In my view, the fact that the personnel of the psychological service at Pomor State University consists of senior students of the same university is the main obstacle to the popularity of on-campus psychological counseling among students. Thus, the main recommendation to the service is to hire psychological counselors, preferably from outside of the university and with long psychological consulting experience. Furthermore, a closer attention should be given to helping students reduce academic stress which is proved to be one of the most frequent problems among contemporary students. Such measures as workshops, publishing of booklets and leaflets about managing academic stress, regular surveying of students at all university faculties on the levels of academic stress would significantly help students to reduce psychological overload at the university.

In addition, the following suggestions are believed to improve the service's functioning:

- Better advertising of activities of the service (for instance, holding demonstrational workshops at the faculties);

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- Holding special courses for academics in collaboration with the university's administration (see the recommendations for the university administration mentioned earlier);
 - Giving the priority to the preventative measures in order to promote psychological wellness among students (in the form of leaflets, psychological seminars);
 - Exchanging of contact with foreign and Russian universities on the ways of reducing high levels of academic stress among college students.

5.4 Ideas for further research

It should be mentioned that the present study has brought up more questions that should be addressed by higher education research, than it has given answers to. Indeed, the field of psychological wellness among college students and its influence on students' subjective educational experience is extensive and complicated. In this aspect, it is seen important to convince higher education policy makers in Russia in the necessity of prioritizing mental health wellness among contemporary students.

One of the ways to do this is to engage into a substantial research on the issues of mental health among college students that would shed light on the actual psychological atmosphere at the Russian university. For instance, a further research could focus on the interdependence of students' drop-outs from the university and the level of academic stress that they experience while studying at the university. Some of the interviewed for this study students mentioned their friends who used to study in the same group but dropped out because of the personal conflict with a teacher or because they were not able to pass an exam. The negative experience at the university had such a strong influence on them that they never started to pursue higher education again. Hence, it is of interest to look at the actual numbers of students who dropped out from the university due to academic pressures, how this decision influenced their future life choices and their careers and the percentage of those who resumed their academic life again.

In addition, a further research could concentrate on the role of academics in how students perceive their higher education experience. One of the most important findings of this study is the necessity of facilitating a positive psychological contact between academics and their students for learners' positive experience at the university. In my view, Russian mentality

when it comes to the issue of power relations within a higher education institution, namely the predominance of teachers' power over their students, need to be addressed by higher education researchers and policy-makers. Moreover, it would be of interest to do research on teachers' perceptions of students' academic stress and of their own responsibility in high levels of stress and alienation among contemporary college students.

Furthermore, there is a need to investigate the influence of exam stress on overall health and academic aspirations among contemporary Russian students. The interviewed students in this study pointed out that they are constantly experiencing strong emotional overload while reading for or taking exams at the university. Some of them complained about problems with sleeping, eating disorders and overall physical exhaustion during examination sessions. These findings are in line with the reports of several Russian physicians who have sounded the alarm about drastic deterioration of both physical and psychological health of young Russian citizens. Thus, there is a need to explore how university practices influence changes in students' overall health. It is, hence, of importance to investigate such issues as if the timetable of examinations corresponds to the medical norms, if students get adequate amount of time necessary to prepare for the exams and, finally, if students get a fair and non-subjective assessment at the examinations.

In addition, comparative studies on the level of perceived academic stress among Russian students and learners at foreign higher education institutions are seen to be of relevance for the research on the mental health among college students. It is of interest to investigate if there is a difference in academic stressors and coping strategies among Russian and foreign students, in what way their higher education experience differ from each other and how their different experience influence students' academic success. Amongst other things, it is of relevance to look at how the administration at foreign higher education institutions perceive the importance of dealing with mental health of their students and compare this to the results of the current study.

5.5 Concluding remarks

The aim of the present study was to investigate institutional practices at one of the Russian universities directed to facilitating mental health of its students. The findings of the current thesis revealed a rather pessimistic picture of the student support structures established on campus of Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk, indicating a limited scope and restrained resources of psychological counseling services and in general little interest in following up students' mental disorders at the university. It has been argued earlier in this chapter that the members of the administration of the Russian university, its academic staff and the faculty administration, do not address the university's responsibility of maintaining students psychological health, though the latter is considered to be one of the prerequisites for facilitating the quality of students' performance at a higher education institution.

As emphasized earlier, there is no organized structure of student support organizations on campus at Pomor State University. However, the current study questions the necessity and usefulness of psychological counseling for Russian students as it is defined by the foreign higher education research. Judging by both students' answers and discussions by the members of the faculty and university administration, Russian mentality is currently a serious obstacle for Russian citizens to seek professional psychological help. This is also confirmed by the reports of the psychological service at Pomor State University which highlight a relatively low number of students who have sought psychological help there since its establishing in 2002. Moreover, the interviewed students themselves alleged they would rather avoid talking to a counselor about their psychological pressures. Instead, they would turn to their friends and family for help and advice.

It is difficult to predict how much time is needed for Russian citizens and students in particular, to direct this generally suspicious attitude to psychological counseling towards a more progressive way of thinking. What is, however, clearly shown by the results of the conducted interviews with the students, is the necessity to improve students' learning climate at Pomor State University. It is of sharp importance to exclude fear, feeling of hopelessness and loneliness from the student university experience. No doubt, psychological counseling is an important prerequisite for students' mental success on every university campus. However, it can barely help, for instance, with improving the strained relationship between academics and students. Thus, attention should be paid to elimination of the institutional practices and stereotypes that prevent facilitating a favorable psychological climate at a Russian higher education institution.

Finally, the university should take responsibility for the psychological health of its students. In my view, the first step in order to create a meaningful academic environment for learners at Pomor State University is to conduct a substantial survey among students from all faculties on the barriers to their positive educational experience. No doubt, it is possible to introduce necessary measures in order to help students alleviate high levels of academic stress. It is only a matter of a more humanitarian way of treating young learners on behalf of the administration and academics, a matter of good will and desire to sympathize with students' vulnerable position at the university and to assist them in their everyday concerns.

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7 Appendices

Appendix A - Interview guide

Questions to the university and faculty administration of Pomor State University:

1. Are there any support structures for students at Pomor State University such as, for example, student counseling? Which student organizations on campus deal with students' academic stress?
2. Who was the initiator of establishing these structures on campus? How long have they been functioning?
3. What kinds of activities are organized by the university in order to make students' start at the university easier?
4. What is the university's responsibility in assisting its students with psychological disorders? How can the university help students to reduce the level of academic stress?
5. How often is the problem of academic stress among students discussed at the level of the administration?
6. How often do the university administration survey students of Pomor State University on the perceived levels of stress?
7. How often does the university distribute leaflets or any other printed informative materials on how to deal with academic stressors at the university?
8. Do you think the problem of stress among students is an important issue to deal with at the university level? What role do you think the university should play in helping students reduce the level of stress? What kind of student support structures should be established on campus in order to do so?
9. What have you heard about student counseling at foreign universities? Which structures do you think is possible to introduce on campus of Pomor State University? What would prevent doing this? Why is it important to have these student structures at the university, in your view?

10. Is there a need for having varied student support structures at Russian universities nowadays? Why, why not?

Questions to the students of the faculty of foreign languages at Pomor State University:

1. How do you feel about pursuing higher education at Pomor State University? What do you like about your studying and what you do not like?
2. How often do you experience stressful situations in your academic life? What kind of stressors do you experience at the university? Are they connected mostly to your studies or other aspects of your everyday life?
3. When did you experience more academic stress – during the first years of pursuing higher education at the university or the last ones?
4. How did you feel about starting the university life? How difficult was it for you to start studying at the university after high school?
5. Who or what helps you to manage academic stress? What help do you get from the university in alleviating stress?
6. What kind of student counseling exists at your university? How often do you use their services? Do you think it is important to have them inside the university? Why, why not?
7. What kinds of activities are organized by the university in order to make students' start at the university easier?
8. What role do you think the university should play in helping you to reduce the level of academic stress? What is the university's responsibility in assisting its students with psychological disorders? How can the university help students to reduce the level of academic pressures?
9. What role can teachers and faculty administration play in decreasing the level of stress among students?

10. How often do you get surveyed on the level of perceived academic stress at the university? How often do you come across any printed materials about the ways of reducing academic stress at the university?
11. What have you heard about student counseling at universities abroad? Which structures do you think is possible to introduce on campus at Pomor State University? What would prevent doing this? Why is it important to have these student structures at the university, in your view?

Questions to the manager of the psychological service at Pomor State University:

1. When was the students' psychological service established on campus of Pomor State University? Whose initiative was it?
2. How successful is the functioning of the service? What kind of support does it get from the university administration?
3. How popular are the organization's services among students?
4. What kind of psychological problems does the service help the students with? What kind of psychological problems are the most common among university students?
5. What kind of activities of the service help students to reduce the level of academic stress?
6. How often does the service survey students of Pomor State University on the level of perceived academic stress?
7. How often does the service distribute leaflets or any other printed informative materials on how to diminish academic stressors?
8. How can the psychological service help freshmen to overcome stress at the start of the university life?

Appendix B – Student stress calendar

(From the ResLifePro website:

<http://www.residentassistant.com/reslifepro/ListofStudentConcernsbyMonth.html>)

September

- *Homesickness* - especially for freshmen.
- *Roommate conflicts* caused by personality differences, lack of understanding and unwillingness to compromise or the new experience of having to live with someone for the first time.
- *Initial adjustment to academic environment* - feelings of inadequacy and inferiority develop because of the discrepancy between high school status and grades and initial college performance. Class size, especially in mass lecture halls, lack of personal interest by professors and performance expectations are also major factors.
- *Values exploration* - students are confronted with questions of conscience over conflict areas of race and alcohol experimentation, morality, religion and social expectations.
- *New social life adjustments* - including new freedom of not having to check with parents about what time to be in, having the opportunity to experience new areas, making your own decisions on when to conduct social activities and establishing yourself in a peer group.
- *Initial social rejections* - creates feeling of inadequacy when not immediately accepted in a peer group, or into a social sorority or fraternity.
- *In-loco parentis problems* - students feel depressed because of real or perceived restrictive policies and regulations of the college.
- *Campus familiarization* - includes becoming familiar with campus, classrooms, buildings and meeting places.
- *Long distance relationship* – students may experience difficulty with being loyal to a boyfriend/girlfriend from home and going out with new people.
- *Financial adjustment* - involves adjusting to a tighter budget now that students are in schools opposed to when they were living at home. Students who are supporting themselves also have to adjust to budgeting their money.

- *International student adjustment* - experience a sense of confusion, vulnerability and a lack of any advocate in higher positions while trying to make a successful cultural and academic transition.
- *Family problems* seem amplified because the student is either in a difficult situation or feeling as though they are responsible for finding a solution. The student could also feel incapable of resolving the problem since they are far away.
- *Adjusting to communicating to administration* with students soon realizing that it is usually a long and frustrating process when trying to work something through the administrative process.

October

- *Academic stress from midterms* appears with the great demand for studying and preparation. For some students this may be their first exam of the semester. For many, the midterm workload pressures are followed by feelings of failure and loss of self-esteem.
- *Adjusting to new study habits* includes not just being able to study the way students did in high school. More time and greater workload needs to be incorporated into their schedule for studying.
- *Roommate problems* continue, but they are smaller in scope than the previous month.
- *Values exploration* continuing.
- *Dating/non-dating/friendship anxieties* are extremely high. Non-dating students feel a sense of loss of esteem because of much value placed upon dating. Dating students can experience feelings of rejection, loneliness and guilt.
- *Homesickness* may be still felt by a number of students.
- *Job panic* for mid-year graduates starts with the onset of resume preparation and interviewing.
- *Students decide to withdraw from school* because they either realize that college is not the place for them, they return home for personal reasons or they transfer to another school.
- *Grief from not being part of a group* develops because of inadequate skills for finding a group, or from not being selected by one.
- *Financial strain* sets in from lack of budgeting experience.
- *Homecoming blues* develop because of no time for social affairs, and/or lack of ability/opportunity to participate in activities.

- *Graduate school syndrome* starts to emerge from graduating seniors. Signing up for graduate school exams, wondering if you will be accepted, wondering which school to apply to and questioning whether graduate school is the right thing to do.
- *Signing up for classes* involves starting to worry about the following semester.
- *Time conflicts* between academic and social expectations emerge.
- *Disenchantment with school* - low reward level because students begin to realize that life at college is not as perfect as they believed.

November

- *Increasing thoughts/deliberations about suicide* occur from inability to cope with the pressures of academic and social expectations.
- *Academic pressure* increases because of procrastination, difficulty of work assigned and lack of ability.
- *Pre-finals stress* starts to emerge as students start preparation for the exams.
- *Time management conflicts* continue.
- *Social apathy* because of academic overload causes frustration.
- *Depression and anxiety* increase because of feelings that the student should have adjusted to the college environment.
- *Economic anxieties* increase because funds from parents and summer earnings begin to run out; loans become due.
- *Increased alcohol consumption* because students see this as an easy acceptable way to relieve stress. Problems occur from not knowing how to handle alcohol responsibility.
- *Unwanted pregnancies* among female students.
- *Roommate problems* may start to emerge again. This is mostly due to academic pressures; people are less tolerant of others.
- *Deteriorating health* starts to affect performance. Reasons include the changing weather and either lack of food quality, or the negative feelings about institutional food. Health is also affected by the perceived inadequacies of the student health centre.

December

- *Increasing thought/deliberation about suicide* occurs from inability to cope with the pressures of academic and social expectations.
- *Final exam pressures* including anxiety, fear and guilt increase as the exams and deadlines approach. This courses increased use of alcohol and drugs.
- *Extracurricular time strains* – seasonal parties, concerts, social service projects and religious activities put extra pressures on students.
- *Financial worries* occur with the thought of Christmas gifts and travel costs.
- *Pre-holiday blues* emerges, especially for those who have concerns for family or family conflicts, as well as, for those who have no home/family.
- Students start experiencing *friendship tensions* because of time pressures.

January

- *Anxiety about second semester performance* begins for those who did not reach as high academic achievement as expected the previous semester. These are pressed to do well not to drop out of school.
- Some students *lose a loved one, a friend or significant other* over the break. Thus, it is hard for them to share the happiness and joy others experienced over the break.
- *Moving to a new academic environment* causes feelings of intrusion because students move onto a unit where most of the priorities have been set and expectations understood.
- *Money problems* begin with the new semester.
- *Post-holiday depression* occurs at the beginning because students are away from the security and family encouragement.
- Some students experience *unwanted weight gains* over the break with the holiday foods and home cooking.
- *Reincorporating social and academic life* is difficult at first with not having to worry about school during the break.

February

- *Hourly exams* and other academic pressures approach.
- Depending upon the weather, some students experience *cabin fever* if the weather forces them to stay inside for a lengthy period of time.

- Students start to experience *vocational choice anxieties* with the onset of job interviews.
- *Worry of finding a summer job* begins.
- *Relationship anxieties* increase as either couples begin to strengthen their engagement or experience weakening relationships.
- *Fall housing planning* begins with trying to decide about living arrangements.

March

- *Academic pressures* increase with the approach of mid-term exams.
- With the pressures of the end of the semester approaching, many students start *to increase their use of alcohol and drugs*.
- *Existential crisis for seniors* who start questioning themselves about the future use and worthiness of their education and deliberating about their future choices.
- *Living arrangement anxieties* are coursed by students' indecisiveness about moving or not moving out, staying with the same roommate or starting to live with a friend.
- Worries about finding a *summer job* may cause severe anxiety.

April

- *Increasing thoughts/deliberations about suicide* may continue to occur from an inability to cope with academic and social pressures.
- *Academic pressures* increase with the end of the semester approaching.
- Worries about *paper and hourly exams* approaching.
- *Fear of sexual assault* among female students with the weather becoming warmer.
- *Summer job pressures* continue.
- *Senior job recruitment panic* continues.
- *Financial strains* from spring break affect students' social life.
- *Social life pressures* increase during this time period due to annual formal dances, parties, concerts.
- *Spring relationship worries* among students are coursed by rejection, fear of rejection, lack of self-esteem, or envy towards their friends who are in relationships.
- *Frustration from being ill* because of frequently changing weather. Colds, lethargic feelings and headaches limit students' social commitments.

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- Pressures resulting from *limited food variation and frustration with institutional meals*.

May/June

- *Increasing thoughts/deliberations about suicide* occur from an inability to cope with the pressures of academic and social expectations.
- *Anxiety* develops because of the realization that the year is ending and *a deficiency in a number of academic areas* still exists.
- *Final exams pressures* are at a critical level with papers, take-home exams and studying. Some of the major effects of the pressure include increased use of coffee, less sleep and a lower tolerance level with friends/peers.
- *Senior job panic about employment* (or lack of) increases. In addition, the student start trying to determine how to finance oneself until the first pay check arrives.
- *Summer job pressures* increase for those who have not yet found one.
- *Anxiety for couples who will be separated for the summer*. Also, the fear that their significant other will find someone else while they're apart.
- *Depression* over having to leave the friends and people that they have grown close to during the school year.
- *Anxiety of having to go home* after having been independent the past year, especially if students are having conflicts with their parents.